THE TRAITOR'S WIFE

W. H. WILLIAMSON

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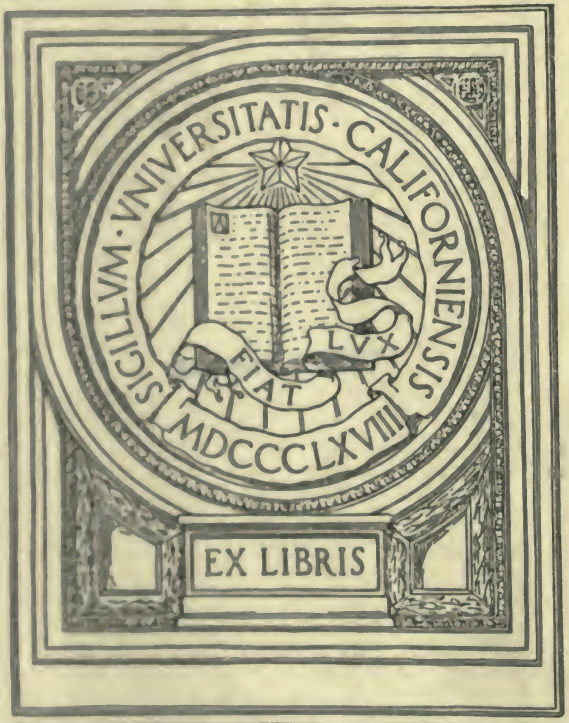

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THE TRAITOR'S WIFE

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THE TRAITOR'S WIFE

BY

W. H. WILLIAMSON

LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN
ADELPHI TERRACE
1908

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TO

MY AUNT

IN GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION

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THE TRAITOR'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

"Where shall the traitor rest,
He, the deceiver
Who could win maiden's breast,
Ruin and leave her?" —SCOTT.

PAUL DRUMITZ walked to the station with the air of a man anticipating the agreeable. He seemed glad to be leaving what was behind, making obvious confession that his heart was elsewhere. He disdained the casual droshky and drove away in the more distinguished *likhac.*

It was early—for St Petersburg. In the Russian capital the day begins late. People have a habit of paying calls at midnight and that conduces to late rising. The shop-keepers only begin to pull down their shutters about ten o'clock and it was to the accompaniment of this that Paul Drumitz drove to the station. He was of the official class. Almost everybody desires to be that in Russia and an extraordinarily great number get their wish. Russian officialdom is ubiquitous.

Paul Drumitz was—so he had told his wife—going

to Yarub on behalf of the Government. The statement was not accurate. He was not going to Yarub at all and the Government had no cognisance of his visit. He was going to Meschenk.

He had the manners and tone of a man of birth and breeding, for his lineage was noble, even if his patrimony were small. Most noble Russians refer to their "estate," but some would experience a difficulty in finding their own. Paul Drumitz had an estate, managed by his cousin Stephan, but it was rarely visited by him because it didn't repay him for the trouble. His income did not come from the land.

He was thirty-four years of age and ambitious of pleasure. He never dreamed of doing anything to benefit the world: he wanted money because it provided pleasure. He longed for power because by its use he was able to do as he wished. Altruism—self-sacrifice—his view of such matters was caustic and scorching. Only his view was not expressed. He knew the value of silence as well as its price. In his case the price was high. In some circles he was known as a reliable official—a *tchin* to be respected. In others he was welcomed as a revolutionary. Paul Drumitz (as we know him) a revolutionary! In another—a small, discreet and important—circle, he was recognised and utilised as a spy. No wonder he lied. No wonder he knew when to be silent.

He chose a comfortable seat in the train, which, though slowly moving in Russia, is at any rate decently warmed. He was not handsome but somehow he had pleased more than one woman. He could coax

and be indifferent, excellent methods when worked together, but feeble as single supports. He had a *blasé* air; his weak chin and voluptuous mouth were covered with a well-trimmed beard and a full moustache. His eyes were blue—a watery blue, with little sympathy in them and no richness of colour. His nose was squat but his shoulders were broad and he was nearly six feet in height. So much for his outward seeming.

There was the usual inspection at the station, with the usual trouble and the usual tears. A missing passport, an arrest, that might mean little or so much, a separation of friends, and Russian officialdom master of the situation. Then the train proceeded at its even pace.

Paul Drumitz was glad to get out at Meschenk which, though generally referred to as a town, is really but an overgrown village. It was not one of the wooden houses inhabited by the peasants that Drumitz sought, but a one-storey building, with a wooden gallery on one of the façades. It was the house of a bourgeois.

Drumitz knocked and he received a welcome he did not deserve. Still if we did not all get, at least occasionally, things we did not deserve, life would lose much of its interest and humanity its encouragement.

Olga Krakoff had her arms round Paul Drumitz's neck and the love that shone in her eyes was sufficient to influence an ordinary man for good or ill. It influenced Drumitz in no sense.

"I was afraid you were never coming, Paul," she said.

He smiled, quite pleased that he had been expected with such interest. He was almost punctual to the time appointed.

He kissed her.

"You are too nervous," he said.

She shook her head.

"So many things might happen," she said, and her attitude showed that she feared the slightest misfortune for her lover.

"Not to us," he said gaily.

"Are you never afraid, Paul?"

He shrugged his shoulders. After all, most people know what fear is, and few acknowledge it. Drumitz never threw away a card and courage is the attribute of the lover.

"What must be must be," he said, repeating the Slav fatalistic formula as though he believed it.

"Have you arranged what you promised, dear?" she asked in a timid, almost apologetic way.

"Practically; it is all but settled."

"Ah!" She kissed him not once but many times.

He put his arm round her.

"You are mine, Olga."

"Always."

Olga Krakoff was beautiful, but she loved too much to be a good judge of a lover. Her big soft eyes were an alluring temptation to an unscrupulous man of the type of Drumitz.

Olga was in the movement: she was an "illegal."

She had done her share from the age of nineteen—she was only twenty-four now — of propagandist work. She had worked among the peasants and sold them revolutionary literature and explained such words as "liberty" and "tyranny" with a fine exactness. She had walked half the night to leave letters in expected places and give signals of warning to comrades.

Drumitz had heard of her through his connection with the revolutionary party, and, having seen her, desired her. She knew nothing of him save that his name was Paul Drumitz. Olga's two brothers were also workers in the cause but to her intense grief they were both suddenly arrested and were now awaiting their trial, a thing that can be so long deferred in Russia.

Drumitz, who could have explained if he would how it came to the knowledge of the police that the brothers Krakoff were engaged in "illegal" work, seized the moment of Olga's grief to offer his sympathy. He won her heart—and had promised marriage.

"Alexander and Demetrius," she murmured at length, with hope in her face.

"I am working hard," he said. "I believe we shall manage to liberate them."

She looked at him gratefully and tenderly. Her brothers freed and by the help of her lover!

"Will they go out of Russia?" she asked eagerly.

"I think so. It will be better."

"Yes, it will be safer. But—nobody can do the cause much good who does not live here."

"That is true. What an enthusiast you are, Olga!"

"Am I?"

"You know you are. Everybody knows you are. You give a few moments to me, don't you, even in the midst of your work for the cause?"

"Every spare moment," she said, looking at him with a love abundant and frank.

He took her in his arms. This was to him a thing to chuckle over as well as to enjoy. His own wife had seemed to love him once, but this was much more pleasing.

"You love me?" she murmured.

"I couldn't help myself," he said.

She seemed very happy.

"I thought I should never hold any love in my heart so great as that I have for the cause and my brothers."

"But you don't regret it?"

"Regret!" She laughed at the word with a joyous ring. And he thought to himself, in his sordid soul, that he occupied an excellent position.

"And I shall never regret," she added.

That, of course, is always love's improvident, boastful way.

He kissed her again, because he could not believe that, and somehow he did not care for her to discuss the future so dogmatically. She would not regret. . . . Well, some women were extraordinarily forgiving and would forgive almost anything in a man they really loved. "You are beautiful, Olga," he said.

"Am I?" she answered and felt grateful for the praise. "Shall I make you some tea?"

"Not yet—in a little while. Sit beside me."

"How long shall you stay, Paul?"

"Till to-morrow." He laughed. "I am supposed to be away on official business."

The "to-morrow" set her trembling and she sat for a moment without speaking.

He was observant with women and guessed the reason.

"I think I will have some tea, dear," he said.

She rose willingly and at once, glad to do something to please him.

"It will soon be ready," she said.

While she got out the samovar and made tea he led her to speak of her connection with the revolutionary party. She told him of things she had done and, trusting him implicitly, gave him the names of friends who had helped and laboured with her.

He encouraged her. He did this kind of thing well. After all, there are expert villains just as there are clever lawyers.

"But Alexander and Demetrius," she said at length, her thoughts reverting to her brothers. "You do think, Paul, that they will escape?"

"I feel sure of it."

"What are you doing?"

"Let me keep that to myself, dear. We may fail. I don't think it possible. But if the first plan is not successful, I hope at least to arrange a 'substitute' on the road to Siberia—you know that is not difficult."

"Siberia," she murmured. The word was too ominous, too awful to pass without casting its black shadow.

"Don't fret, dear, we shall save them. At least, I will do all that can be done."

"I feel that, Paul," she said. And it was almost wonderful that this man could raise so great a trust in a woman. Olga Krakoff was a remarkable woman. She was unselfish, and somewhat of an idealist, and that was all in favour of the rogue.

"How is the substitution effected?" she asked. "I have heard of it, but I don't think I quite understood."

"When the politicals go to Siberia, there is always with them a gang of criminals. Now, by approaching the head of the artel of the criminals, it can be arranged that one of these men shall take the place of one of the politicals at any given moment. The political effects his own escape, the criminal takes his place—that's all."

"It sounds so simple," she said.

"Yes, it—sounds simple. But it has often been successful."

"And will Alexander and Demetrius—" she began.

But he interrupted her. He put his arm round her.

"Let us forget them for a moment or two," he said. "I don't see you so often, Olga, and—" He kissed her.

"It is selfish of me," she said. The unselfish are constantly upbraiding themselves with selfishness,

whilst the selfish talk superbly of their "self-sacrifice."

Dusk had thrown a gentle darkness on the landscape; the clumps of willows and poplars, so abundant in parts of Russia, were silhouetted against a gloomy sky. The people of Meschenk were mostly indoors, and Paul Drumitz and Olga Krakoff were careless of the light and darkness of the outside world when they were suddenly disturbed.

There was a gentle knock on the door of the house that sheltered them.

The man and woman looked at each other and were still.

It is only in Russia that a knock on the door is so often the prelude to despair.

Olga stood up, but Drumitz caught her hand. There must be no indiscretion. He did not court publicity.

An arrest in a country where "administrative methods" prevail is generally but another name for condemnation. Olga Krakoff realised this—as do all "illegals"—and there was the fate of her brothers before her.

"The police," she whispered to Drumitz.

He shook his head.

"They would not scratch," he said.

She looked relieved.

"It may be a friend," she whispered.

He nodded.

The knock was repeated. It was not quite so timid as before.

"If it is Alexander or Demetrius—"

But he stopped her excited speech with a warning look. He felt it was not the police. Them he could eventually have escaped, but a friend might know too much about him in St Petersburg and that would be awkward. He cursed the caller. He felt that friends could be a nuisance. All shady people feel that.

There was a tap on the window.

Olga leapt from fear to joy.

"It is somebody," she said to Drumitz, almost pleadingly. She meant somebody who counted in her heart, of course.

Drumitz had his own game to play. He put up a warning finger and nodded.

"Probably," he said; "but I will not be seen. I might compromise you, and it is always wise to be discreet. Can I hide here?" He pointed to the room opposite.

She nodded, and he went quietly through the door.

"Don't let anybody know I am here," he said.

She smiled a little at his prudence, and then kissed him to smother the odd feeling.

"I won't mention you, Paul," she said; "even if it is my best friend."

Then she went to the door.

A man with a bent back, with the air of a poor pedlar peered in her face. She, standing in the light, did not distinguish his features easily—perhaps that was part of his intention.

"It is very cold, matouchka."

The phrase was banal, but the voice and the accompanying look were full of significance.

Olga almost cried out. What she imagined seemed too joyful. She took a step forward and put her face near the man's. He took her hand.

"Are you alone, Olga?" he said.

She flung her arms round him.

"Sh—" he said, and at once pushed into the house.

"Demetrius," she exclaimed when they were in the room and her heart was beating wildly. Demonstrative like the Slavs, she stroked and kissed her brother and scarcely knew what to do. "And Alexander—?" she said eagerly.

"Free too, Olga. We both escaped."

She was tingling with ecstasy. She wanted to shout, dance—to do anything to give outlet to the emotion that possessed her. She laughed as if in mockery at their enemies. Then she thought of Drumitz and instinctively she turned towards the door through which he had gone, and gave a little cry of delight. What a surprise! What a pleasure to introduce her lover and her brother under such circumstances! Then she remembered his injunction and her promise.

Ah, well! She would wait a little. The surprise and pleasure would be all the greater for the waiting. She felt as if she kept a rich treat to herself and enjoyed the secrecy.

"How did you escape, Demetrius?"

"It is a glorious tale. We shall not be disturbed?"

"No."

"One of the warders was a friend and prepared everything for us. He has gone too. Alexander and he and two others are going to Switzerland if possible. I want to join them—will you come, Olga?"

She shook her head.

"My place is here."

"As you will. I thought as much. I expect we shall return soon, for nobody can do much out of the country. But I want a passport; that is why I came. You can get me one through Stanovitch, and I must hide till the morning."

"I knew you would escape," said Olga.

"Did you dream it?"

She shook her head.

"I got reliable information about you."

"From whom?"

She hesitated a moment. Her lover should hear this conversation, and would throw open the door and introduce himself. Olga quite enjoyed the situation.

"Paul Drumitz," she said.

"Drumitz!"

"Yes."

He stood staring at her as though he did not understand. She was disappointed. She wanted her lover's name to cause delight, and Demetrius looked unpleasantly perplexed. "Drumitz," he repeated, "Paul Drumitz!"

There was no mistaking the look and accent. Olga felt chilled. Her brother had drawn from her a step backwards and was looking incredulous.

"Oh, Demetrius! what is it? Why do you say his name like that?" she exclaimed.

"His name like that!—he is a spy." He hurled the last word, for his feelings were hot. She felt fit to weep. She saw her image broken, her ikon destroyed. Her face was white.

"Spy," she murmured faintly, scarcely realising the news to the full.

"Yes. It was he who betrayed us."

Her eyes blazed at that.

"Betrayed you!"

Demetrius nodded.

"We learnt that in gaol." He gave a significant little grunt. "So he told you, did he?"

"Paul Drumitz, Demetrius, you are sure that was the name?" She spoke as one stunned—hoping a mistake had been made.

"Paul Drumitz, Traitor—that's the man. Blue eyes, pointed beard, sidles up to you and is always knocking against you when he's near you. Paul Drumitz . . ." As he spoke Demetrius Krakoff assumed an attitude of very dangerous hostility to Paul Drumitz.

Olga sat down and looked as though she had been lashed. She had more to think of than her brother knew.

"He was to be my husband," she said faintly, clearly apologising for stooping to such a position.

Her brother dropped his bundle at the news and lifted his sister's face.

"The villain," he said. "He is married!"

She could go no paler. Her brother held her close to him, feeling her catastrophe. Demonstrative sympathy is easier to a woman than to a man, but the Slav is emotional and Demetrius was imaginative.

Looking on the ground, her hand resting on her brother's shoulder, she said very quietly as though the news were ordinary and had just come to her remembrance—

"He is in that room."

Demetrius looked surprised even after what he had heard. His own undoing could not have been more neatly sought. If Paul Drumitz got away with the news he had heard . . .

Demetrius seized a revolver and rushed into the next room.

But Paul Drumitz was not there. That astute gentleman had realised this place was not one to suit him.

"He has gone," said Demetrius.

Olga nodded. It was the confirmation of everything. It sealed the infamy. She sat down, looking haggard. Treachery is repulsive, and when one can't hate a traitor, one at least loathes him. Olga was doubly betrayed.

"What will you do?" she said, speaking as if she were very tired.

"Get away at once. You must come too!" He was suffering from no blow like hers, for he did not know all, and felt the need of instant action. Drumitz, with the knowledge of the escape and the whereabouts of at least one fugitive, might still serve Demetrius a nasty trick.

"He heard, perhaps," said Olga, starting up and realising the peril of wasting time.

"We must go at once. Find the passport, also your own, and let us get outside this country at once."

She acquiesced. The packing was hasty, but they were not disturbed while doing it. Without property some people would give up the ghost in despair. In Russia there are thousands who will give all they have —even liberty and friends—to propagate an idea. Demetrius and Olga Krakoff were wise enough to esteem instant flight more precious than the saving of goods.

They left Meschenk in the night and safely crossed the frontier. When they were in Prussia they breathed a little more freely, but not much. Bureaucracy in Prussia is not kindly disposed to those who talk of the rights of the people too loudly. The police must have their work.

Olga said to her brother when they were safe in Zurich: "I must go back to Russia."

"I understand, Olga," replied Demetrius. "We will find out what we can of Drumitz, and he shall have his—reward."

Olga nodded.

"The reward of a betrayer."

CHAPTER II

"Home has not the same sound in everybody's ears."

PAUL DRUMITZ'S wife sat in her flat in St Petersburg engaged in her correspondence. Although it is just as well to be careful what one writes in Russia there is more written concerning politics than many people think, as there is far more plain speaking now than the average newspaper reader in England imagines. Irene Drumitz was writing to her friends in England with a freedom that the English person cannot wholly shake off.

She was undeniably pretty, but a better adjective to describe her would be sweet. Her sympathy was an ever ready virtue. To such an one life might have brought happiness if only she had been well mated. It is either too early or too late in the day to rail at marriage. Paul Drumitz was not the good husband he had promised to be—the reader has no need to be told that with emphasis. And his wife felt his selfishness and his neglect.

He snatched her when she seemed to be on the point of being won by an Englishman named Alan Leigh. There were all kinds of rumours and reports set going at the time, and one was that her father was indebted pecuniarily to Drumitz. Alan Leigh had left her to go to Russia—he had an estate there

which his mother, a Russian, had left him—and when he came back, it was to find Irene Carr engaged to Paul Drumitz. It may be that the rumours were all false and nothing but a specious tongue and the incomprehensible rest had made Miss Carr consent to marry the Russian.

The marriage took place and Leigh went to India. On his return he divided his time mostly between Russia and England and was gradually drawn into the revolutionary party.

Irene Drumitz's father was the Rev. Joseph Carr, of good family and unorthodox views, which is a hindrance to preferment. When he died he left enough money to pay the bill for dilapidations at the vicarage and no more. His son was doing fairly well as a barrister at the Cape. So Irene felt herself without strong support when her husband was more than usually unkind. No wonder that the sweet face had a sad look.

When Mr Leigh was announced she stopped her writing at once. They had met once at Monte Carlo since the marriage, but that was when she was happier, when her marriage with Drumitz did not promise so leaden a burden, was not so empty of loveliness. Then she had felt sorry for Leigh, for his secret seemed no secret to her then. He hid it as well as he could, but his hiding was clumsy—perhaps because he had too big a heart. The man with a heart always appeals to the woman who has one, just as mean folk find a kind of common sympathy in discussing their niggard economies.

She was tactful of course—she could not help being that—and he was sufficiently observant to admire her all the more for it. They parted friends, with a bond between them.

This was his first visit to her in St Petersburg. He had not avoided her wilfully before but he had not gone out of his way to see her. He felt it was not perhaps wise for himself. But now he was passing through on his way to England and a call seemed not only desirable but imperative.

He brought another atmosphere with him in the room. The England of shady lanes and winsome curves, of hawthorn and primroses came to Irene Drumitz when a countryman called on her. To-day she could almost smell the roses in her father's garden, that she and Leigh had watered together.

"It was good of you to call," she said, greeting him with a glad smile.

"Don't call it good. I could give you far better adjectives. I am on my way to England."

"England," she murmured. "When shall you come back again?"

"Soon, I think."

"Have you been in Russia long? I rarely hear of you."

"Two months."

"Not in St Petersburg."

He shook his head.

"No. I should have called if I had been here. I have been in Moscow and Kieff and Iver."

He spoke deliberately and she understood.

"Be careful," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is an object in life," he said, and felt the next moment that he had spoken unadvisedly.

"Yes," she said, with a sigh, and he did not realise that a similar motive moved her to the same opinion.

"I have managed to dispose of two hundred copies of *The People's Will* during the last fortnight," he said, referring to a newspaper published by the revolutionary party.

"I did not know you were so keen, Alan," she said, being moved by his enthusiasm; for be it remembered she understood much.

"I am getting keener," he replied.

"What will be the end?" she said.

"Do you mean of us or of the struggle?"

"I was thinking of—you," she said.

"Don't. To think of our danger in this game is to be too depressed. The cause is our support."

"Oh, Alan! Why—" Then she stopped. These outbursts were no good. "I suppose you must," she said.

"I must. Those who see tyranny know that it must be fought."

She was silent for a moment and thought of her husband. He, too, was of the illegals, but did he ever speak like this?

The tea was brought in the next moment, and as she handed Leigh the lemon he looked at the soft

brown eyes that had won his heart years before and wondered if she were happy. Even the best-hearted woman will turn some stripe to the discerning.

"How is—Paul?" he said at length.

"Well, thank you."

"What is he doing? He doesn't run you into unnecessary risk, I hope."

She shook her head.

"I run no risk. I do nothing. He tells me very little. Perhaps he wants to keep me from trouble," she added quickly, as if to excuse the lack of confidence the remark betrayed.

"Perhaps it is as well," Leigh said slowly.

They were silent for a moment. These two felt more than they could utter. Each wanted to ask personal questions; questions of trivial comfort and of deep personal feeling. Each had a desire to get on the bedrock of companionship and be made a confidant of the other's candid feelings, and they both felt that impossible. They were two people chained by sentiment, separated by principle — slaves in the galley!

He asked after her brother and told her news of common friends. They touched too on that tender topic—reminiscences: so full of sentiment, so captivating to the warm-hearted. And they had been together much in the past.

She realised her anxiety for him and feared.

She was not in the thick of the revolutionary fight. She had played her *rôle* on one or two occasions as one of the Ukrivateli, or Concealers; one of that band

that helps any revolutionary in need of concealment. But her husband had his own game to play and doubtless only allowed her to act a part that suited him. She would have done more but was content to follow his directions.

"Things," he said, "that many people here can regard with indifference make my blood boil in anger."

"That's home," she said understandingly.

"I expect it is. We have been accustomed to liberty and the denial of it is trying. The less freedom men have generally, the more tyranny is exercised by the few. The way in which one narrow-minded bigoted man here can control the destinies of hundreds of beings immeasurably superior to himself in knowledge, character and outlook is appalling. 'You mustn't think this,' 'you mustn't dream of that,' 'don't utter a word on that subject'—oh!" he paused. "It is awful, isn't it? That road to Siberia lined with those who dared to dream of Freedom and tell their dreams! The prisons carpeted with men and women whose crime it was that they loved liberty—a little more liberty—more than a government of stern repression—"

"Alan!" she said, and looked round, for he was speaking loudly.

"I am sorry. I must not get you into trouble."

"Don't mind me," she said.

"I would like to thunder this from the housetops."

"In St Petersburg?"

He smiled at the picture.

"I suppose Luther did such things?" he said.

She shook her head.

"No man can do it in Russia and be free."

"No. But we shall win some freedom. We shall have a government elected by the people, a freer press and freer speech sooner than many think."

She looked at him admiringly. His enthusiasm was catching.

"Not so free as in England?"

"No, but maybe as free as in Prussia, and that will serve."

"Are you going to be the people's Joshua?"

"No. I hope to do more than stand and wait, but I can only be a digger, I fear."

They were interrupted the next moment by hearing voices in the hall, and they looked at each other with anxiety, for plain speaking in Russia can lead to Siberia.

"It is Paul," she said, and Leigh noticed there was no glad ring in the voice. "He has come back sooner than I expected."

The two men greeted each other politely, almost cordially. Leigh noticed that the attitude of husband and wife towards each other was without warmth. He thought it early for domestic winter.

Drumitz had remarked the colour in his wife's face and did not like it.

"I haven't seen you for quite a long time," he said to Leigh, with an inviting manner. "What have you been doing?"

"Digging."

Drumitz nodded.

"Deep?"

Leigh shook his head.

"I should have said scratching," he said.

"It is slow work. What—er—particular kind of—scratching have you been doing?"

Drumitz had the art of being directly inquisitive without great offensiveness. Necessity is the mother of accomplishment.

"Mostly propagandist."

Drumitz nodded.

"Do you find you make progress?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I—oh! I"—he gave a dramatic look round. "I think we go too slowly. Propagandism is necessary but it is not enough."

"I agree," said Leigh, quietly. "It is very slow."

"I want to meet some of the more desperate comrades. Do you know any?"

"There are many." And then Leigh seemed to be warned by an instinct of caution. A British prudence counselled him. Amongst friends names were common encouragement, but Leigh kept his knowledge to himself without—had he been asked—being able to give a good reason for his action. Some of our wisest and best deeds have been done on least thinking.

"I think I shall have to join the advanced guard," he said.

Drumitz was watching him closely.

"Haven't you met Jacob Deuc?"

"I've heard of him," said Leigh.

"He believes in the red terror."

"Oh!"

"Those bombs are awful," said Irene, making her first contribution to the discussion.

Drumitz gave a little laugh.

"Is that your opinion, Leigh?"

"It all depends what they do."

Drumitz began to wonder if he were being fenced with, and Irene noticed a difference in Leigh's outspokenness with her, and his comparative reserve towards her husband. But she put the reason to the wrong cause—quite excusably.

She turned to her husband..

"You don't believe in bombs, Paul?" she said.

He did not look at her as he replied—

"It doesn't do to fling such things carelessly, though I suppose you know that Krilovitch and Saroff are keen advocates of the bomb school?" He turned to Leigh as he made the last remark.

"Oh!"

"Haven't you met them?"

"Saroff I know."

"Didn't he introduce you to anybody?—he is very sociable."

"Very. He is one of the most earnest men I have ever met. But I must go. I am on my way to England."

Paul Drumitz kept his thoughts to himself; but

they were not wholly comfortable. Did Leigh suspect? Or was there an antagonism between them due to the fact that Irene was his—Drumitz's—wife?

Paul Drumitz felt he did not care. He hoped it was not suspicion, but if Alan Leigh returned to Russia and became troublesome, then in all likelihood he would make a journey to Siberia.

After Leigh's departure, Irene Drumitz sighed and wondered why some mistakes should have to be so bitterly paid for.

And Leigh, thinking over matters, said to himself, "She is not happy. And somehow I don't like him. I don't—trust him."

CHAPTER III

"Blood will have blood."—MACBETH.

PAUL DRUMITZ had left Meschenk not only hastily but in a vile temper. He cursed a good many people as he journeyed back to St Petersburg in the train. Foremost in the curse were those prison officials who had let Demetrius Krakoff escape.

Suppose he and Demetrius had met. . . . He experienced a most uncanny feeling at the idea. But they had not met and he—Paul Drumitz—was free.

Of course this put an end to his liaison with Olga Krakoff. Well, that would perhaps have come to an end soon in any case.

The betrayer of men and women came to the conclusion that the family of the Krakoffs must be rearrested at once. Paul Drumitz felt he would not like to meet Olga Krakoff again or either of her brothers. He took care to avoid such a meeting by informing against Olga. One notices that his depths were very deep.

This was the fashion of Paul Drumitz: he made use of other people solely for his own satisfaction, regardless of theirs. His great object at this time was to get into the very heart of the revolutionary move-

ment if he could and, by a superb *coup* of betrayal, obtain a reward that would mean an influential governorship with a blank cheque for license.

He had served a decent apprenticeship to his game and was now getting well known in revolutionary quarters. He was, in fact, gaining access to the inner circle of fighters in Russia, and hoped soon to reap his reward.

His *rôle* was perilous, of course, for his life would not be worth a month's purchase if his real intent were discovered. He had been immune from suspicion so long that now he never expected to be met otherwise than as a friend in "illegal" circles.

It was the day after Leigh's departure that he betrayed—the word goes to his attitudes quite naturally—signs of excitement. His wife noticed he was agitated or, rather, anxious about something, and watched him closely out of her bountiful desire to understand and comfort. If the machinery of watches were as ill arranged as the lives of many married couples we should probably revert to sundials.

He noticed her attitude and told her it annoyed him. And when he went out she wondered if he were going into danger.

He certainly went out anticipating something out of the common. There was a flush of excitement on his cheek that spoke of the unusual. The sharp-eyed concierge noticed it and jocularly said—

"Been made a general, Bareen?"

Drumitz laughed. He wondered if the dvornik

were gifted with prophecy. The Slav will either believe anything or nothing.

The flush of excitement grew more marked as Drumitz, making detours, for purposes best known to himself, eventually called at a house in an outlying suburb where he was welcomed as a friend.

It was past eleven o'clock when Drumitz and George Poletkevitch came into the street together, entered a droshky and were driven away by Mendel Reussner, revolutionary.

A meeting of importance was being held at midnight by one of the committees that fight the bureaucracy in Russia. The meeting-place was a house three miles out of St Petersburg, and when Drumitz saw all his companions he felt the need of all his wits. These men had rarely met all together. They transacted their business so far as they could without incurring the danger of a general meeting. But one or two of the more fiery spirits were determined on bolder action than had hitherto characterised their policy.

There was Nicholas Meserka, whose energy was amazing and daring equal to anything. He preached, he worked, he warned, and when told he was too bold always replied, "Not bold enough."

Jacob Aschenbraum was there too. He was not a talkative man. Talking can lean to virtue's side, but it would have to be uncommonly good to be as useful to a cause as were the deeds of Jacob Aschenbraum. He was possessed of great wealth and he devoted almost all his income to the cause. He went

shabbily dressed and poorly fed, that he might give the more.

There were Gradoff the dreamer, Ossinsky, the wild torchbearer, Vera Tetalov with the piercing eyes, the practical Rosenbaum, Hypolite Herzen, the ugly man with the beautiful heart, and Sophia Minskov, who might have moved as a countess, only that she preferred to pose as a peasant and fight for greater freedom for the Russian people.

It was in this galley that Paul Drumitz rowed. Some were easy to deceive, but there were others before whom it were well to exercise an infinite care.

They greeted each other with a note of emotion. They all realised the peril they ran and that any parting might be the last. Each had a tale of interest to tell: all had a welcome for news. Happily none seemed hopeless, for to keep one's principles and lose one's hope in Russia is to touch the confines of black despair.

Drumitz had one very uncomfortable thought: Suppose what Demetrius Krakoff knew were also known to some present . . .

No wonder he felt that he needed all his wits to act, conceal and observe.

George Poletkevitch took the chair.

"Business, comrades, business," called out Rosenbaum. "We must be careful not to be too long together."

"True," said George Poletkevitch. "Well, comrades, we have met to discuss the advisability of prosecuting a more vigorous campaign."

"Hear! hear!" from Nicholas Meserka.

"I say 'ditto' to that," exclaimed Ossinsky. "I think we have been far too quiet. Education is good, but we realise nothing. The Government doesn't give way a hair's-breadth because of our propaganda."

"That's right," said Rosenbaum. "They give way before force—force of any kind—but force."

Vera Tetalov nodded her head.

Sophia Minskov said—

"It is our only weapon. We must educate and rouse the people, or frighten the bureaucrats."

"I would raise a revolution," said Ossinsky. "If a hundred thousand men decently armed would resolve to fight to the last we could win. We could force the Tsar to give in—"

Gradoff smiled.

"That is my plan. We want to seduce the army and then—and then. Who would be able to resist us? I have worked it all out, comrades, and there would be plenty for everybody in Russia, with no poverty, no famine, and no parasites. I can see the social millennium—"

Rosenbaum interrupted him.

"Let George Poletkevitch speak," he said. "We must be practical and separate."

"Yes," said Jacob Aschenbraum. "I want to know our plan, perhaps I—I can help."

"We have tried hitherto to confine ourselves," said George Poletkevitch, "to peaceful methods, but the Government shows us no more mercy, and as

some of their creatures have been behaving with more than their customary brutality, the suggestion has been made that in the interests of decency and of the Russian people, these officials should be—removed."

There was a murmur of assent from the more fiery spirits.

"What do you say, Paul Drumitz?" asked Sophia Minskov.

Drumitz following each emotion, strategically said: "I agree."

"Death," said Vera Tetalov.

Meserka put his hand across the table and stroked hers.

"Yes, death," he said. "They kill us vilely. It is good they should die."

"It seems to me," said George Poletkevitch, "that we are all of one mind concerning this matter. They think nothing of killing dozens of us. Surely in the name of justice we can avenge a few of our comrades' wrongs. We are not going to pretend that this is the red terror: we want officials of the Government to know that they must show just a little humanity—"

"That's it—humanity," said Vera Tetalov.

"Otherwise, they will die."

The meeting was unanimous. Paul Drumitz realised he had entered into the heart of a pretty conspiracy. It would have suited his purpose better if "red terror" had been preached—that is, a terror exercised by bombs and pistols and sudden

death at any time and on all and sundry who stood in support of the Tsar and his advisers. Then of course his betrayal being greater, his reward would have been commensurate. But he was satisfied. If only these men would aim high in their new policy; if only most influential men were put upon the list . . .

"Who is to be the first?" asked Mendel Reussner. "Well, Paul Drumitz, whom do you suggest?"

Drumitz was taken aback. He was not prepared for this and unfortunately he showed his hesitancy.

But Vera Tetalov saved him embarrassment.

"Papiloff," she said. "Papiloff the butcher."

"I was going to suggest a grand-duke," said Ossinsky, "but Papiloff will serve."

"Yes, Papiloff," said Sophia Minskov, with a quiet voice but full of resolution.

"Papiloff the butcher" had attained to that grade which is the object of all who will climb in Russia in either civil or military circles—that of general. His brutality was a commonplace. Having received a reprieve for one of his prisoners, he promptly had the poor man shot. As part of the railway was destroyed in his province he razed a whole village to the ground and led the peasants into a swifter end. A girl political whom he took— But it is not necessary to relate why Papiloff was called the "butcher."

Vera Tetalov had meant to avenge some crying wrongs of poor humanity for some time and she welcomed this opportunity.

"Is he the only one?" asked Rosenbaum, who was

invariably practical. "Why not have a list so that we may all know and—" he nodded suggestively.

To make a list was easy: the difficulty was not to make it too long. Drumitz thought fit to suggest a victim—it served two ends—and flung out the name of a poor wretch, who had once done him a bad turn by getting the better of him in an official race. He called the man a murderer and said he had flogged some politicals.

Somehow Mendel Reussner watched him very closely. "We don't want to kill men who only carry out orders that are merely obnoxious. The carrion like Papiloff and Von Lautz we will kill, because they kill."

"Yes," said Jacob Aschenbraum. "Death only when it is deserved."

Gradoff nodded.

"If only death would fall on those who deserved it—on all tyrants!"

"Wait, friend," said Hypolite Herzen. "Some day the spirit of freedom will fly over Russia, and children will sing, and men and women will laugh: but in that day there will be no tyrants. There is hope for Russia."

"There must be," said Sophia Minskov.

"And these villains," said Rosenbaum. "How are they to be disposed of?"

"I will do for Papiloff," said Vera Tetalov.

But Ossinsky laughed.

"I wished for the butcher."

"Comrades," said George Poletkevitch, "we must

arrange this matter properly and in order. We must make no mistake and allow of no lapses. We embark upon a critical task but we must carry it out."

The others, feeling that at last they grappled with something tangible, leaned on the table and their eager looks towards the speaker showed the deep interest, the sacred meaning they attached to what they conceived to be a righteous and just policy.

And somehow Mendel Reussner observed Paul Drumitz very closely.

George Poletkevitch continued—

"We are not reckless assassins. We do not kill the creatures of the Tzar because we detest the Tzar's government. We kill men who will not live in honour nor be moved by compassion. Those whom we have mentioned would be condemned to death by ordinary tribunals in almost any civilised country save Russia—"

"First comes Papiloff the butcher," interrupted Rosenbaum, who loved figures, facts and action above the most beautiful speech.

Poletkevitch nodded.

"He comes first. But since we are all here for the same purpose, all united—we are that?"

There was no contradiction. Paul Drumitz was flinging glances to right and left and trying to read thoughts, and disarm suspicion. He realised to the full that he kept his skin whole only by keeping his secret well hidden.

"No need to ask that," said Ossinsky, who thought

most workers as wildly enthusiastic as himself. Poor Ossinsky! He paid the penalty of meeting Paul Drumitz.

"We have got a list of undesirables." Poletkevitch spoke calmly and without a trace of sarcasm or humour: these people were too deadly serious for much laughter—that was part of the penalty they paid for their careers. "We put Papiloff the butcher at the head of the list," he continued, "and we will draw lots who shall kill him."

He looked round, and they each and all returned the look and then nodded acquiescence. The method appealed to them. The fiery ones desired the task but were willing to waive their opportunities to let others slack their desires. Unselfish even in this!

"That it may be I!" murmured Vera Tetalov.

And it is to be remarked that amongst the most daring of Russian revolutionary bodies are always to be found women. The sight of suffering so often moves the weak to heroism.

They prepared the lots, and Drumitz wondered curiously if he should be the one selected. He thought of the circumstance grimly, as one having a humour of its own. It was certain he would attempt to kill no government official, not even "Papiloff the butcher."

Suddenly Mendel Reussner said—

"Before we discover who is to be the favoured one, I suppose we all agree that it is the business of the others to see the deed is not—neglected?"

There was silence for a moment as though the suggestion were unlooked for — unnecessary. But Mendel Reussner, who was a very shrewd man, looked very serious.

Ossinsky laughed.

"If only it is I," he said; and they all felt somehow, there would be no necessity to call Michael Ossinsky to account for a neglect of this work.

Vera Tetalov, trusting all, was about to ask if it were worth while troubling about such a matter when George Poletkevitch said—

"Yes, Mendel. Nobody must draw back now. We all swear that we will do to him who draws this lot as we would have him do to Papiloff the butcher, if Papiloff is not dead in—a fortnight?"

"A week," said Vera Tetalov.

"Less," said Ossinsky.

"A fortnight," said Rosenbaum. "A revolver and" —he made a suggestive gesture. "There is no trouble. Papiloff thinks the people vermin and tramples on them. A fortnight!"

"A fortnight," said George Poletkevitch.

And so it was agreed.

Then they drew lots and the lot fell on Paul Drumitz.

The light in the room was dim, the steady gleam from a small lamp being the only illuminant. The shutters were well closed so that not a hint of this gathering could reach the outside world. The faces of these political schemers were thrown into weird shadows and their looks as they waited for the lot to

be declared were worth a better canvas than this page. Eagerness—no fear. Except the face of Paul Drumitz, who felt he was near to betraying, not those he sat with, but himself.

He pulled himself together when he saw the cast of the die. He assumed a jaunty air. But that could not last before these superlatively sincere people.

"I'll help you all I can," said Ossinsky.

"Don't waste time," said Rosenbaum.

They talked of their own doings and of things not necessary to this story, and then broke up. They went out singly and in twos, for to do otherwise was to act foolishly.

Jacob Aschenbraum, who had given thousands to the cause, buttoned up his threadbare coat and walked away with Vera Tetalov. They were both to know the inside of a Russian prison soon and freedom for but a little while.

Mendel Reussner managed to suggest they should all hide themselves till Papiloff was dead—they might have been observed—and then he drove the droshky back containing George Poletkevitch and Paul Drumitz.

Paul Drumitz in his own room had the face of a ghost and the feelings of a haunted man. What cursed luck had made the lot fall on him! And his companions were such determined creatures. He might baffle them by illness, by—he knew not what exactly, but he had an idea that a Russian prison holding these men safely would be his best security.

He had another ugly thought: the Krakoffs!—Their story would get out . . .

In a haggard way he wrestled with his difficulties. The revolutionaries would not forgive or forget him: their way with those who betrayed them was scant and efficacious.

But he determined to do them mischief and all that lay in his power to reduce them in number.

He informed the police of the names of the revolutionaries.

But even the police can't do all they wish. They caught Ossinsky swiftly, and soon afterwards the self-sacrificing Jacob Aschenbraum and Vera Tetalov. The first two died: Vera Tetalov went to Siberia.

But the others were free.

Paul Drumitz began to fear. He realised what it was to be living under the fear of death. He leapt at a shadow and began to tremble at the sudden appearance of any human being.

"I can stand it no longer," he exclaimed to his wife. "We must get out of this country for a time."

She stared blankly. Like most men possessed with an idea, he credited his companion with some knowledge of the thing that obsessed him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Can't you guess? I've been denounced to the Government and may be arrested at any moment."

She gave a little cry.

"Pack," he said, "pack. We will leave the country to-night."

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"England."

Was it a mere chance meeting, simply a coincidence that led Mendel Reussner, excellently disguised, to journey out of Russia by the same train that carried Paul Drumitz?

CHAPTER IV

"The ungodly flourishing . . .
. . . and lo! they were not!"

LADY CLARICE'S receptions in Curzon Street were not the usual order of those given by dwellers in that neighbourhood. Lady Clarice had brains, a quick eye for talent, a disregard for mere convention and a sympathetic personality. All who knew her well liked her. Some did more—and she was always kind. But she had little patience with frivolity—sustained and constant frivolity that wastes time, energy and talents—and none with stupidity.

Only that the word had become old-fashioned one might say she had a *salon*. Her friends came from north, south, east and west as her sympathies travelled as far. The well-bred "Johnny" rarely called twice on her: he was bored and Lady Clarice could be outspoken. For the rest, anybody who was anybody worth speaking of was always welcomed.

The crowd to-night was as distinguished and as cosmopolitan as ever. Lady Clarice was speaking to Countess Brinski.

"Which is it to be?" she said.

The countess shook her head languidly.

"I feel *horriblement ennuyée*—at times."

"That is when the heart feels hungry," said Lady Clarice.

"Really. A yawn *de cœur?*"

"But this is evading the question, not answering it."

"I can't tell you, dear Lady Clarice."

"Or you would."

"Certainly, I am not mistress of my own destiny."

"And the philosophers insist that we are."

"Men never will learn some things."

Lady Clarice smiled.

"I think I understand. If you could arrange your destiny, you could tell me which—"

"I think so," said the countess, quietly.

"You know I am not prying."

"I know that," said the countess, quickly, with a look that spoke even gratitude.

"If I can help—" said Lady Clarice.

"It is not tragic yet."

"It will never be that, I hope. But I see so many taking the second best. And you—"

The countess put her hand on Lady Clarice's arm.

"You are more than kind," she said.

"I loved your mother and I should like to see her daughter happy, and not taking the second best. Though," she added, "they are both *du premier choix*."

The Countess Brinski was a Russian, though her mother was English. She was young to be mistress of so much power and her hand was sought by many of her compatriots. Somehow she inclined to the

stranger and her preferences were extended to two men, one of whom was Alan Leigh, the other Robert de Basseaux, a Frenchman of good family and ample means.

The countess was a pretty woman, adding attractiveness to her looks by her taste in dress, her vivacity and pleasantness. She showed her English heritage by having a fine head of hair. Her eyes were a dark grey, large and expressive. Her nose was beautiful in shape but the nostrils were so narrow one would not rashly accuse the owner of courage, particularly as the mouth was small and tremulous.

Her own preferences in the matter of the two men were placed on Leigh. As long as there was hope in that quarter she felt she could not accept Robert de Basseaux.

Lady Clarice saw the Frenchman at the door.

"I wonder," she said, "if he really came to see me or you."

Robert de Basseaux came up to her, a little showy perhaps, but perfectly natural as he walked through the room. The social gifts of the French are undeniable. It is the boor who calls little courtesies "tomfoolery." As a people we English muddle through, not only wars, but the little gates of social life. The Frenchman *and* woman go through with an art and an elegance that we sometimes think studied and perhaps, in our view, a little overdone. But their social hinges work very smoothly, and there is no denying that they reach affability much more quickly than we.

Robert de Basseaux was bowing before Lady Clarice.

"If you had to make your choice, Monsieur de Basseaux, of what nationality would you be—French, Russian or English?"

"I have no mind for any but the English when I call here—save the Russian," he added, with a look at Countess Brinski.

"Were you serious," the countess asked Lady Clarice, "or did you ask the question to try his ability?"

"May I answer that question?" asked de Basseaux.

"Yes," replied Lady Clarice.

"My ability in these circumstances is never so helpful as my veracity."

"I think," said Lady Clarice, "there is something to be said for the *mélange*."

"The Russian for dreaming, the English for doing and the French for daring," he said.

"If only to dream were to dare, and to dare were to do—and to do were to do wisely."

"If to do were to do wisely," repeated the countess.

And then Alan Leigh was announced.

He came in easily, as an English gentleman of culture: neither awkwardly nor ostentatiously. Lady Clarice left the other two and entertained Leigh. When their greetings were over and the countess and de Basseaux were out of earshot Lady Clarice said—

"And when are you going to marry?"

"Who knows?" he said smilingly.

"None better than yourself."

"It doesn't wholly depend on me."

"Who knows?" she retorted. "It is time, you know. You have the making of far too good a husband to be wasted on bachelorhood. Tell me what keeps you back."

"The inexplicable."

"That is no reason—it is the resort of the vacillating."

"To vacillate is sometimes an advantage."

"Don't delude yourself with that. Blindness might be called an advantage."

He smiled.

"I have no chance against you. But if you really wish to know, I have been thinking of—marrying."

"So long as you choose well." She cast a quick glance towards the countess and Leigh followed her look. "Sometimes," she said, "there is danger in delay."

He looked a little serious on seeing the countess with de Basseaux.

"Who is that with Countess Brinski?" he asked.

"Monsieur de Basseaux—you know him surely. He went on the expedition to the South Pole."

"I remember him. He—the countess is not engaged yet?"

"Not that I know of. But she is remarkably attractive."

"Yes!"

"Do you think me a matchmaker?"

"Would you like to be thought one?"

Lady Clarice laughed winningly.

"I don't mind in the least. Let me tell you something. Most women are matchmakers."

In a little while Leigh found himself beside the countess and de Basseaux was tactfully led away by Lady Clarice to be introduced to an English lieutenant who was on the point of leading an expedition to antarctic seas.

"When do you think of going back to Russia?" the countess asked of Leigh.

"I don't know. I haven't the heart sometimes, and at others I feel selfish."

"Selfish?"

"When I think of the tyranny of every petty official there; of the fact that a man who dares to criticise the governing class risks being sent to Siberia—"

She put up a warning finger.

"You have not joined the revolutionaries?" she asked with some anxiety.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"They have my sympathy. When I hear fresh cases of tyranny my blood boils: I can't help it. I feel I must help those who fight against these things."

"Don't listen to them. You are too sympathetic. Besides you would dare too much. You can't right everybody's wrongs: why worry? I expect things will get better in time. I feel very sorry for those who are sent to Siberia, but—don't you mix yourself with that class."

She almost pleaded and he was touched by her obvious solicitude.

Alan Leigh began to look at the countess as a probable wife. He was delighted with her as a feast for the eyes. She was distinguished. As a partner, a companion she seemed admirable. Alan regarded her as a wife to be proud of. One would enjoy introducing her. . . . My wife! . . . She would make an impression, and her husband be spoken of as a "lucky man." She would be an excellent hostess and a very pleasant helpmeet.

When a woman has made an impression of that kind the issue of the campaign is in her favour.

Still the countess was not Irene Drumitz. There Alan knew was the woman he had loved. She was not so distinguished as the countess, not so *chic*, if the word may still pass, but she was a woman to love wholly and without stint, and that is above all elegance and distinction. Since Irene was another man's wife Alan was not so foolish as to think nothing of other women in consequence.

Second best. . . . It is the hallmark of the human race. There are very few who get their Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.

Alan was a woman's man. Tender, honourable and sympathetic, he was bound to attract. Besides, he had advantages. His blue eyes were of a deep, rich colour and his almost black hair and black moustache made him, with his regular features, a handsome man to look at, particularly as he was of a tall, athletic build.

It was not surprising the countess preferred him. Other women had done the same.

"Are you still wandering?" she asked at length.

"I only came from Russia a fortnight ago."

"To make some place an abiding city?"

"I think so."

Was that hopeful? She felt pleased at any rate, and a woman's instinct in what concerns the emotions is frequently worth following.

"I think you owe that to your friends," she said.

"Perhaps to myself too. Are you staying long?"

"I am in town for another month and may remain in England till—" She shrugged her shoulders. "I am like those people who can only count up to four: I cannot see far."

"I may call and see you?"

"I shall be pleased. I am staying at the Carlton with my aunt, Princess Ruoff—you remember her?"

They were interrupted then and separated, each with a sweet emotion. She could never love like Irene Drumitz, for she was not of that kind, nor be loved by Alan to the height and depth of his heart. She was circumscribed by her nature: he by circumstance. For her the marriage would be delightful: for him satisfactory.

They both thought they were on the point of the eventful.

Lady Clarice said as Alan bade her adieu—

"No daring—no spoil."

"No daring, no disaster," he retorted.

"That isn't you," she said. "That is the voice of the feeble. And your eyes are very bright to-night."

To the countess she said—

"Good-bye, dear. When I feel I would like to try and mix myself up with other people's affairs I wonder if I am helping Heaven or the wicked one."

"Have you been mixing yourself up in somebody else's affairs?"

"No, no. Heaven and the wicked one are best left to manage their own business."

And when they had gone and Lady Clarice thought of them she said to herself—

"I hope he will marry her; she will keep him out of mischief. If he stays single much longer I feel sure he will go to Siberia. . . . Almost any marriage would be better than that."

Alan walked into Piccadilly and had a desire to settle down. Life, with the Countess Brinski as his wife, would be most enjoyable. She was undeniably pretty, she was well-born, well-bred, well-dowered, accomplished. She seemed one suited to double harness.

Alan felt her attractiveness. She impressed him more the more he thought of her. He would call at the Carlton to see her and put his destiny in her keeping.

He felt somewhat elated at the decision. Life promised pleasantly. It was precisely as he had pictured it: but who gathers the harvest of his imagining? They are not unlucky who find the second best; so many seem to miss the really good things altogether.

Of course Alan Leigh was a favoured creature.

He was dealt with bountifully. His heart was good and as likely as not to give him more discontent than most things. Even now he realised that he missed ecstasy. His heart, too, made him understand suffering and hate injustice, and that does not make for peace in this world since there is so much suffering, and justice seems so sleepy a god.

Alan turned into his club with a feeling of sociability. He felt joyous and that made for companionship. People who keep their joys to themselves only half realise them and in the end even their joys become a mere melancholy satisfaction. Alan was not of this awful breed. He wanted to greet people, talk to people, chaff them, laugh with them. He couldn't tell them he intended to propose to one of the most charming and desirable women in London at the present time—though really, if somebody could have been deft enough he might have admitted that, for he was frank and not afraid of confession.

He made up his mind he would call the next day at the Carlton. Suppose she refused? He wouldn't suppose anything of the kind. Let her if she dared. He would treat her well: he was neither bully nor weakling, selfish nor censorious. . . . And she was uncommonly pretty . . .

The waiter stood beside him.

"Hello, Bunce! I'll have a—no, I won't. I'll wait till somebody comes in I know and then I'll break a bottle of Mumms with him. Are you keeping well?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. I hope you are well, sir—you look it, sir."

"I'm feeling very well at present. Is there an evening paper?"

"Yes, sir—*Globe, Westminster, Pall Mall.*"

"Any of them."

Alan took one and looked at it vaguely. The big headings attracted his attention.

"STARTLING MURDER IN LONDON.
MAN SHOT,"

Alan read carelessly. To-morrow he meant to ask one of the most attractive of women to be his wife. . . . She dressed exquisitely, and what beautiful arms she had!

He turned to the paper as if to prevent himself dwelling too long on this alluring topic. He glanced at the account of the startling murder in London. He read almost casually as if he lent only a small portion of his interest to the paper. But suddenly he read with greater attention.

"The motive of the crime is less mysterious but more romantic than was at first imagined, for a piece of paper was found under the coat of the murdered man bearing these words—

"'THE END OF A TRAITOR.'"

But it was the closing lines that made Alan Leigh's face assume another colour and his mind forget the countess.

"As we go to press," said the paper, "we learn that Madame Drumitz has identified the body as that of her husband."

Alan read the paper again.

"Madame Drumitz," he murmured.

He went to the tape machine.

"Bloomsbury murder. . . . Madame Drumitz identified body as her husband, Paul Drumitz, who left St Petersburg ten days ago. No arrest."

Paul Drumitz dead. The news was a shock. Alan was stunned. He recalled his visit. What had happened to cause this? Murdered!

Poor Irene! Poor—poor—Irene!

Then other thoughts came to him.

Irene was a widow.

He put the paper down and put on his hat and coat. He felt he did not want to meet anybody he knew; still less did he feel like drinking champagne and being hilarious.

CHAPTER V

"The wife of a traitor!"

ALAN went to his chambers at the Albany. Paul Drumitz dead! The news hummed through him like a plaintive dirge. He was too open-air a man to be very introspective, and death was not to him a morbid subject. He was affected by the news of someone gone for ever, but like the healthy young, who regard death as too remote for serious contemplation, and the wise old who see folly in worrying about the inevitable, he quickly thought of living matters.

The paper found on Drumitz was a curious document. Alan wondered what it meant: "The End of a Traitor!"

He knew Drumitz was concerned with illegal matters in Russia, but a traitor! Whom and what had he betrayed? A traitor? He shuddered, for the word had an ugly sound. The heritage of a traitor is shame. Poor Irene!

His body had been identified by his wife. What were they doing in England?

Alan began to see that he could solve none of these questions by thinking about them. He knew nothing and must be enlightened by others.

But Irene? What a trouble! Her husband shot! Alan began to ask himself if she would be grieving

very much. Had she loved her husband? But she would be full of grief in any case, for death swallows up most animosities and the dissolution of the least lovely of marriages will move a woman to tears, if not to some strain of grief. Tears in a woman are not always to be taken too seriously; like the language of many men they are apt to get exaggerated.

Alan wanted to comfort Irene if that were possible. But he would not intrude at present. The comfort of some people in times of trouble is little better than the sympathy of those who will insist on having the bandages taken off wounds, so that they may know and see and, if possible, touch. It must be admitted that these curious sympathisers are frequently encouraged, for vanity and curiosity play so great a part in the lives of human beings.

Alan, not being of this spurious order of wound-probers, did not seek to call on Irene for the purpose of disturbing a natural grief or of satisfying a curiosity that in his case was sympathetic and not vulgar. The nearer we approach the great things of life, the farther we get from the petty and trivial. It is true in love as in other matters.

Alan wished to help Irene if he could. He considered she might be greatly troubled by visits of officials and others, and probably he might be able to save her unnecessary interviews and in some way lighten her load for the moment.

But her address? He was ignorant of it, of course, and the papers gave him no clue at present.

He spent a disturbed night. His sleep was fitful

and his dreams were strange. He got up early and seized the paper the moment he came down to glean further news of the murder of Paul Drumitz. There was the flaming headline, and the smaller but almost equally obtrusive sub-headline. There was an interview with somebody called a Nihilist which was supposed to elucidate Russian politics for the British public, and the whole affair was made one of great interest. The newspaper reader scarcely realises how his attitude towards certain items of news is influenced by a sub-editor.

"We understand," said the reporter, "that the inquest will be held to-day. The evidence is likely to be sensational."

Alan began to think the evidence would be sensational, for the mere mention of the note found on the murdered man was sufficiently out of the ordinary to cause a sensation. But it was obvious to him that Irene's evidence would be asked for and that was an ordeal she would probably have given much to avoid. The thought of this decided him to call on her if he could. Unfortunately he did not know her address, but at any rate he could find out where the inquest would be held and see her there.

It happened that as he walked towards Piccadilly Circus he was accosted by a big man with a big beard and big eyes.

"George Poletkevitch," said Alan, holding out his hand, pleasant surprise in his face.

George Poletkevitch smiled.

"You are in a hurry?" he asked Alan.

"No—and yes. You have heard of Paul Drumitz?"

The older man nodded.

"I read it in the papers. Everything gets in your English papers."

"Too much occasionally. What of this note? What was Drumitz doing here in London?"

George Poletkevitch shook his big head.

"There are a good many things which happen to people and things we imagine we understand very well that somehow we can't explain at all."

"The paper: 'The End of a Traitor'—you saw that mentioned?"

"Yes."

"A traitor!"

"They have been known."

"But Paul Drumitz—do you think he was a traitor?"

"The breed is commoner than we think. Some betray big concerns, some little, some betray men, some women. The end of a traitor—" he shrugged his shoulders. Like many big men George Poletkevitch's movements were characterised by a kind of dignified ease. "Very few can say they never wandered from their post."

Alan nodded.

"But this is not a mere wandering from the post."

George Poletkevitch was silent. In Russia people learn to hold their tongues; that is one reason why the Russian dreams and gambles—he is afraid of saying something indiscreet.

"But I am almost forgetting you in the news

about poor Paul Drumitz. What are you doing in London? Are you staying long?"

"Indefinitely."

"Ah!"

"The inconvenient police seemed to desire to get hold of me, so I thought it best to go."

"I am truly glad they missed you."

"It was a near shave. Somehow they made a dash for a dozen of us, but—" he shrugged his shoulders and the accompanying gesture was significant.

"They would be sorry to miss you. Shall you go back?"

George Poletkevitch shook his head.

"I am well known now and it would be difficult to escape capture. I can do more good here than in Siberia."

"True, true. I was going to see if I could find out where the inquest on Paul Drumitz will be held—it takes place this morning. Will you come?"

"Yes. I—should like to be present at the inquest if it is possible."

They walked together down Shaftesbury Avenue and then took a cab to the Judd Street police-station. The body of the murdered man had been found on the north side of Gordon Square and had been taken to a public-house near.

Alan got definite information at the police-station, and he and Poletkevitch walked to the public-house where the inquest was to be held.

Some few leave this life in a blaze of glory; some there are who go while multitudes hold their voices in

a touched reverence and regret, but the great majority slip away from life unnoticed and unremembered by all but a few. Some seem to have their ends framed in a sordid and mean setting. Paul Drumitz appeared to have met with an end sudden, unexpected and least desirable. Shot at midnight, lying on the ground till picked up by the police, taken to the nearest public-house, gazed at by the curious and by, at least, one woman of feeling.

A row of mews skirted the public-house, and Alan and his companion found their way through the smell of the stables and the reek of beer into the room where the crowner's quest was being held.

The twelve men were of many callings—a cab-driver, a milkman, a shop-keeper—anybody the police could easiest empanel. They were sitting in two rows facing the door. The coroner sat at the head of a table, while the reporters were accommodated at a table farther away.

A crowd of the curious and idle to whom these scenes are the real tragedies and comedies of life waited eagerly for the evidence which was to be, as the papers had undoubtedly promised, sensational. Bedraggled women looked at a figure, pale and sweet, bearing a look of tenseness that suggested a great effort to go through this business well, and nodded sympathetically to each other.

"Widow?"

"'Spect so."

They nodded and nudged their neighbours. Then—

"Pretty?"

"Um—toff, eh?"

More nods. More nudging.

"Quiet there! Quiet!" came the voice of a policeman.

The jury looked nervous and unduly important. Alan and George Poletkevitch entered the room. The other occupants were too absorbed with the coroner, who had just begun his quest by swearing a policeman, to take any notice of the newcomers. The room settled down to quietness, for all wished to hear the evidence, and a woman with a crying child was turned out.

Police-constable D 57 deposed that on Tuesday night he was on his beat when he heard a pistol shot, and a few minutes afterwards he was accosted by the man Emery—who was to be called as a witness—who gave him information which led him to find a man shot in Gordon Square.

"Was he dead when you reached him?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

"Whistled for assistance, and P. C. D 25 helped me to carry the body to the White Horse Hotel."

"Did you search the deceased?"

"No, sir."

Here Sergeant Wilson deposed that he searched the clothes of the deceased and found some papers—all produced—a card-case and sundry articles, and then communicated with Madame Drumitz.

A big craning of necks here to see Madame Drumitz, and the jury began to wonder what use they were at any rate, and was it any good keeping them from their work to hear this story, when they could read all about it in the *Star*.

"Was anything else found on the body besides the clothes and the papers already produced?"

"Yes, sir—this paper."

The people nodded excitedly to one another. The coroner took the paper and handed it to the foreman of the jury, and he, after reading it, handed it round to his companions.

"Madame Drumitz!"

Irene stood up, her face white with a little flush on the cheek and a red patch near the temples. She played nervously with her handkerchief and seemed more than once on the point of collapse. After she had been sworn the coroner said—

"You may sit down if you would prefer."

"Thank you," she murmured almost inaudibly and sat.

Alan and George Poletkevitch were both watching her very closely, unobserved by her, for though she seemed in a shrinking kind of way to have looked round once or twice she had not actually looked in their direction. Alan was much touched. Her position was obviously very painful to her and he wished to help her, to do something to comfort and soothe her. He blessed the coroner in immeasurable terms because he asked Irene to sit down.

When the coroner began to speak again the shuffling

of feet and whispering that had taken place as Irene was sitting down, stopped.

She was wearing a thick veil which she had placed on her hat as she had taken the oath, and she watched the coroner with a painfully anxious expression as though she had gone through great trouble.

"What is your name?"

"Irene Mary Drumitz."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"You have heard the evidence of the police and you have, I understand, viewed the body of the dead man?"

"Yes"—a mere murmur.

"Did you identify it?"

"Yes."

"Will you please tell the jury"—the coroner made a slight inclination towards the twelve good men and true, who, to tell the truth, were most sympathetically inclined to this sweet lady.

"The body of my husband," said Irene, in a voice scarcely audible.

"What was his name?"

"Paul Alexander Drumitz."

"You have heard what the police said: have you any idea as to the motive of this crime?"

Irene looked nervous, awkward and embarrassed.

"I—I only know what the police have said."

"Exactly. There is a paper"—the coroner stretched out his hand and took the proclaiming slip from the

foreman of the jury and passed it to Irene, who read it.

"Does that," said the coroner, "give you any clue?"

Irene shook her head.

"How in the world can she be expected to find a clue in that? What does she know?" whispered Alan to Poletkevitch, who made no reply; being apparently absorbed in watching this little court of inquiry do its work.

"No," said Irene, in answer to the coroner.

"When did you leave Russia?"

"Ten days ago."

"Had you any special reason for coming to England—or rather perhaps I should say—for leaving Russia?"

Irene hesitated.

"Our interest, of course, is to discover who killed your husband, and a knowledge of the motive may help us," said the coroner.

Irene nodded. She quite realised the position and the attitude of the coroner.

"My husband was in favour of reforms in Russia and he heard that he had been denounced to the police."

"He told you this?"

"Yes."

"And so you came to England because your husband was afraid of being arrested in Russia?"

"Yes."

"Had your husband any enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Can you suggest no motive for this crime?"

Irene shook her head. "No."

"You can throw no light whatever to help us?"

"I am afraid not."

Irene, so far, had been what is known as a good witness. She had answered frankly and, though faintly, yet with distinctness. But she seemed buoyed up not so much with a set purpose, as with a patience that suffers without groaning and will endure even unto death.

The coroner said at last—

"Thank you, that will do;" and Irene gently inclined her head and dropped her veil. She had gone through an ordeal that had not left her unmarked. She almost fainted now that she had finished, and Alan went forward to her assistance.

"You," she said in a whisper and clung to him.

"I will take you home," he said.

George Poletkevitch followed them to the door.

"I won't intrude on her now, but I would like to call when she is less troubled," he said to Alan, and then he returned to hear the end of the inquiry.

The man Emery was the next witness. He was a small man with a red face—red not in evenness but in splashes, some parts being much redder than others. He continually addressed the coroner as "yer wusship," which suggested a rude familiarity with other courts, and he had an air of boisterous importance.

His evidence amounted to this: he was walking through Gordon Square on the night in question when he heard a revolver shot, and on reaching the north side of the Square saw a man lying on the ground and another man just disappearing in the direction of Euston Road. He ran first to the man who seemed to need help and saw that something serious was the matter. He then looked for the police. By this time the man whom he had vaguely seen going towards Euston Road had disappeared.

The rest of the inquiry was quickly gone through and the verdict the jury returned was expected: "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown."

It was now the business of the police to find the guilty person or persons.

Irene refused to let Alan accompany her back to her rooms—she was staying just off Russell Square. She looked dazed.

"I don't want to disturb you, but can I be of any help?" he said.

"It is very good of you," she said.

"There will be details—the funeral."

"I—I have wired for Stephan—Paul's relative—who manages his estate—to come. Paul said I must do that if anything happened."

"But he can't be here for some days. If you think I can be of any use I will call any time."

"To-night. I feel very tired now."

"To-night."

He called a cab and put her in, and then she

broke down. The tension of the inquest was over and the tears were not to be kept back any longer. She looked cast down, as one who expects but a hopeless dawn.

Alan was touched by her sad expression and turned back to the inquest, only to meet George Poletkevitch coming away.

"Is it all over?"

"Yes."

The two men walked into Gower Street and slowly towards Piccadilly. Both were silent.

"Are you calling on Madame Drumitz?" Poletkevitch asked at length.

"Yes—to-night."

The Russian did not reply at once. After a long pause, he said—

"After the funeral I should like to call."

"She would probably be glad to see you."

Again a pause. George Poletkevitch certainly thought before he spoke, which is not a bad habit in people who say things worth hearing, though it would be a calamity in those circles where a constant ripple of words, words, words, seems to be a necessity. The wise speak too little and the foolish too much.

"Did Madame Drumitz—love her husband?"

Alan was a little disturbed at the question. He looked at his companion as if he would fathom the motive of the question. But Poletkevitch was looking at other things: it is easy to do that in a London street.

"I—presume so. At any rate she feels his death. Why do you ask the question?"

"For information's sake. She gave me the impression of one not grieving so much over his death as pierced with a secret sorrow."

Alan looked at the speaker keenly. George Poletkevitch was a very observant man.

"Perhaps," he said, "the paper has upset her." He stopped as he walked. "Perhaps she believes it," he said.

"Perhaps," added George Poletkevitch.

"Do you?" said Alan, quickly.

The big man shrugged his big shoulders.

"I am not one of those who can believe without evidence."

"You suspect?"

"Suspicion—what is it after all?"

Alan was silent. He began to think of Irene and her bearing. Suppose she, too, believed this story—nay, suppose it were a true label, and she knew it?

A traitor—Paul Drumitz a traitor. If it were true! The suggestion raised a nauseous feeling in him. "The end of a traitor."—They were ominous words. And Irene had been the wife of a traitor.

At the Albany the two men parted.

"I shall see you soon?" asked Alan.

George Poletkevitch nodded.

"I still have work to do. And I—want to call on Madame Drumitz. Was he a good husband?" he asked unexpectedly.

Alan was a little surprised at the question.

"I—I thought he behaved decently. I never heard or noticed anything to the contrary. Why?"

"Always why." Then the big man smiled as if to deprecate inquiry and apologise for not giving more information. Some people accomplish more with their manner of manipulating silence than others with a careful choice of words.

CHAPTER VI

"Who can calculate what is due to Chance?"

WHEN Alan called on Irene after dinner that evening he found her dressed simply in black; her pale face was flushed as she had been at the inquest. That trial over, she was, however, a little less in bondage to her grief. She seemed to be wounded too deep for tears, and those shed after the inquest were probably due to the reaction following the high tension, and to Alan's presence.

"There is always a deal to do at such times," he said, as they sat together in the room in Montague Place. "In a way it would be as well if you could occupy your mind with something, but let me relieve you of all worry."

"You are very kind, Alan. I feel numb—mentally numb, somehow—and as though I were living in an unreal world."

"I understand," he said. "We all get in unreal worlds when these great crises come upon us. Have you arranged about the funeral?"

"A man called this afternoon, and I have merely arranged that they shall take the coffin—to a mortuary, which, he said, was a thing they did when it was inconvenient to have it elsewhere."

Alan nodded.

"Very common in London. Shall I see to all the rest?"

He relieved her of all further interviews with undertakers and others, and she seemed grateful for his help.

"It was a most dreadful crime," he said at length. "Shall you do anything to track the assassin?"

"The police say they will do all that."

"Of course."

She did not seem inclined to talk of the crime. As she had explained, she felt numb, and things were unreal.

"What shall you do?" Alan asked.

"I have had no time to think at present. Pa—er—a house was taken only two days ago at Hampstead. I suppose I may as well go there."

"Probably you could get out of that agreement if you wished."

"I don't know what else to do. I think I shall take it. For the future—I shall see."

"You have sent for your cousin—Stephan, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Alan was observant enough to notice that the arrival of Stephan was not looked forward to with any eagerness.

When he left her he realised that what she had said was true: she was numbed. Whether it were due to the loss of her husband or the manner of his death, or the paper which placarded him publicly as a traitor, Alan was unable to fathom. Probably, he thought, it was due to all the circumstances. He felt

she was struck a greater blow than she cared to show. He could not help ruminating on these things. In his own mind he had long been convinced that the bond between Paul Drumitz and his wife was not the sweet nexus of a full sympathy and a glad companionship. Love seemed to be wanting there. The demonstrations of affection are not for the curiosity of observers, but there is always the tone, the attitude, the unmistakable little attention to betray love to those who can understand it.

That Paul Drumitz and his wife were not moaners at their fate, Alan was sure. They avoided jars with success—probably by not seeking each other's society and confidence too much. This made Irene's attitude more remarkable. Alan consequently adopted the theory that the brutal end of her husband and the shame of his branding had wounded her deeply.

He felt he would like to do something to the man or men who had, by striking Paul Drumitz, dealt Irene such a blow. For a moment he felt angry with this blind justice that must scourge the innocent when slaying the guilty.

The guilty!—That idea clung to him. Was Paul Drumitz really a traitor? Alan knew there were many in Russia tempted to play this odious *rôle*. But the husband of Irene!—No wonder she was numbed.

She of course was innocent: more, she was above suspicion; but it was not a pleasant thing to be recognised as the wife of a traitor.

Alan loved her still. What was to be her destiny

and his? Even a hint of his hopes—and they came even without encouragement—was not to be dreamt of yet. But Alan knew himself; knew where his heart was fixed, and that was something.

He remembered the Countess Brinski. Had he promised to call? He believed he had. She was certainly most desirable. She had charms, she had virtues, she had many accomplishments. She was a woman a man might sigh for and be excused. But she didn't hold Alan as did Irene, and that made all the difference; and now that Alan saw free the one woman his soul longed for he could relinquish all thoughts of marrying Countess Brinski without even a regretful sigh.

Yet even the Countess Brinski could not be altogether ignored because Irene had appeared on the scene. The promised visit must be paid. Alan paid it.

"You are not in a desperate hurry to visit your friends," said the countess, when he called. She seemed, nevertheless, pleased that he had come, and there was a little anxiety expressed in her face which was not the look of a woman who confidently expects to win. It is possible Lady Clarice had mentioned Alan's predilection for Irene.

"A man may be in a hurry and yet not do all that he desires," said Alan, who never felt bored in the countess's company.

"Am I to take that as a diplomatic and epigrammatic excuse and one of the phrases that throw people off the scent—or as a genuine explanation?"

"Why not a combination of them all?"

"Diplomacy and the truth—epigram and fact—people don't wear flannels *and* a fur coat."

He laughed.

"I quite understand one thing: delay has been its own punishment."

The Countess Brinski was not a preternaturally vain woman, but to say she was not vain or susceptible to flattery would be to deny her humanity and her beauty. Few of us can escape the wiles of flattery if only it approaches us with a reasonable delicacy and a frank air. There are some people, of course, who find no difficulty in accepting the flattery even though it come naked and unashamed and speak with a blatant voice.

"You shall tell me what I am to understand by your phrase, 'A man may be in a hurry and yet not do all he desires.'"

"Certainly."

"First, let me give you some tea and you may have it à la Russe or à l'Anglaise—lemon or milk?"

"Lemon," said Alan, and the countess was inclined to wonder whether that too were not said with a desire to please. When a woman takes an interest in a man, he can scarcely utter a word or move a limb but she gropes after his motive, and is not happy till she finds one.

As she handed him the tea, the countess said: "Well?"

"Is that meant to be the start—the pistol shot?"

She nodded.

"Now you leap along your explanation."

"I have been busy," he said. "You know that Paul Drumitz is dead?"

"Yes."

Alan hesitated and made a gesture signifying surely that was all that was necessary to give in the way of explanation.

"You mean you have been so engrossed with his affairs that you couldn't call?"

"Practically. You know his wife?"

"Yes." The countess was watching closely. "You can dismiss the explanation as of no importance; tell me of this awful affair. How is she taking it?"

"Considering the shock, I should say well."

"Paul Drumitz was a Nihilist then, was he?"

"Nihilist?" Alan repeated the word doubtfully. "He probably never called himself that. He was certainly in sympathy with those who fight for a little more freedom for the Russian people."

"Candidly, I never seem to understand what these people want with their cry for freedom—freedom for what? You can't let people do what they want or say what they like: even in England that isn't permitted. They do draw the line somewhere, and it isn't really surprising that it is drawn somewhat closer in Russia than here. In time—" She smiled winningly as one having spoken hastily who does not desire to speak imprudently. "But of course I don't understand politics a bit. Perhaps if I did—"

"If you did, countess, you might be in Siberia."

She shuddered.

"A little knowledge of politics may be a dangerous thing in Russia."

"Touching them may be," he said.

She looked at him anxiously. A man is not so quick at such moments as a woman, or he would surely have understood. She cared, undoubtedly.

"Why do you bother with such things—politics, I mean?" she asked with a solicitous air.

He shook his head.

"Why does a woman want to soothe a child if it cries? Why do you want to help a man in distress? Why do you hate a tyrant?"

"Do you ask those questions because you want answers, or merely to overwhelm me?"

He laughed.

"Not to overwhelm you, surely. If you would prefer a plain answer—I can't help it."

"Not help taking an interest in politics?"

"No."

"And men will actually accuse us of having no sense of humour!"

"Politics are not humorous in Russia. They may be in other countries, but not there. Think—but I won't weary you."

"You don't weary me," she said. "Your politics would probably be most interesting, but those I don't understand are the kind which get people sent to Siberia, or shot like this poor Drumitz."

The countess spoke in a voice full of feeling, which seemed a little alien to the lighter tone in which she

had been discussing politics, and the changing humour was interesting to the man.

"Let me give you some more tea," she said.

"Please. The doctors tell me tea can accomplish almost as much as alcohol."

"If we had no bad habits," she said, "what strange creatures we should be."

"And what a different world!"

As she handed him the tea, she said—

"Tell me all you know about the poor Drumitz."

"I know very little," said Alan. "It seems he had been denounced to the Russian authorities as a dangerous person; which means, he dared to have opinions not held by the bureaucrats, and so fled. When he got here he was suddenly shot."

"There seems to be a lot missing," she said.

"Real stories are often lame to the outsider," said Alan. "We don't see enough. It is the writer of fiction who makes things appear so simple, and bridges every gap."

"Who killed him, though? There was a paper found on him, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

She waited.

"'The end of a traitor,' it said."

"I read that; but it has very little to do with the fact that he was denounced as a Nihilist, has it? The police didn't kill him, did they?"

Alan shook his head.

"A traitor," she said, and she shuddered. "There is always that danger in politics." She spoke sig-

nificantly, and meant that her words should not be misunderstood.

"Yes," he said; "every secret society has its traitor, if treachery will pay."

"It will always pay in politics. But Madame Drumitz—how is she?"

"Do you know her?"

"Yes; I met her in St Petersburg, and I think I met her before she married."

"She—she has been dealt a hard blow, but she bears up wonderfully. The shock seems to have stunned her. I hope there will be no collapse."

"You have been doing all you can for her, I suppose?" The countess spoke with affected carelessness. If anything, the attitude was a little overdone; but that is the fault of the over-anxious actor.

"Yes—what I can." Alan, too, was aware that he spoke with diffidence on this subject.

She wanted to ask more, or at least to learn more, and did not wish to betray too great an interest.

"Will she go back to Russia?"

"Not at present, I think."

"You see a good deal of her, I suppose?"

"I have been doing what I can to help her."

"Poor woman!" said the countess, wondering whether Alan spoke with feeling, or whether his interest was no more than that of a sympathetic man to a woman in trouble.

"Do you think it safe to be seen so much with—Madame Drumitz—and these Nihilists?"

Alan laughed as a man threatened with a phantom.

"There is no need for fear here—in England, I mean."

"But in Russia?"

"We are not in Russia."

"Exactly. I've heard—of course I know nothing really of these things — that these Nihilists are watched and their friends noted."

She was certainly betraying an anxiety for his welfare that touched him.

"I am not afraid," he said.

"A man may not fear for himself," she said, "but he may make his friends anxious."

"A man would certainly feel flattered by the knowledge that he made you anxious."

"Siberia is not a nice place," she said, "and it wouldn't suit you. Moreover, you needn't feel flattered: you have friends."

When Alan left, he had a feeling that he had been most agreeably entertained. A pretty woman who sets out to make a man feel contented with her society can generally accomplish her aim. The countess had done as much. Alan saw in her the theoretical wife *par excellence;* that is to say, the wife of a man's calculation, the wife who should be this, that, and the other, to fit in with the aims, aspirations and life of her husband. The countess had beauty, charm and wealth beyond most women, and her desirability as a wife was of a nature not to be resisted by many men. But to a man in love with someone else her charms fell on the desert, the fire blazed unwarming, splendour was lost in darkness.

The countess had this wasted feeling when Alan had gone. His eyes were more brilliant at Lady Clarice's. He was a different man there. When he had promised to call, he had meant more than a formality. What had caused him to waver?

She put it down to Irene Drumitz. Life was a pure gamble. Hundreds of people just missed luck by a hair's-breadth. Some just caught it. There was always the story of the passenger who missed the train that ran to destruction, as there was the story of the one who just caught it. Chance, chance, chance—creatures of chance! The countess believed in luck a great deal. If Paul Drumitz had been shot twenty-four hours later, she might have been the affianced wife of Alan Leigh, for he would probably have called and, doubtless, proposed.

The countess sat thinking. What a complicated world! What a tangle of humanity and circumstance! Because Paul Drumitz was a traitor, or somebody thought he was and shot him, she, the Countess Brinski, must be content with the second best.

Alan had been very nice—frank, agreeable, friendly. But a lover!

The countess sighed. She did not delude herself. He had receded. Still, there was always a chance, and perhaps she was wrong.

After all, the best does come before the second best in our hopes.

And Alan. He had enjoyed the society of the countess very much. She was most desirable as a

wife—if a man were not in love with someone else.

Desire and circumstance; one wonders sometimes which of these two has married most. The chance meeting—the unfortunate missing.

CHAPTER VII

"What was the Secret?"

GEORGE POLETKEVITCH was a big man with a big heart and not daunted by big enterprises. He came from a country where things are not niggard. The powerful have enormous power, poverty is vast, suffering is prodigious. The country is colossal, and the biggest river in Europe winds its sullen way slowly but surely to the sea—a fit emblem for those who believe in the emancipation of the Russian people into the freer waters of Liberty.

George Poletkevitch was of noble descent, but like many another noble in Russia he had put aside his rank, hidden it under a common guise and done his share in propagandist work in humble service. Tyranny is demoralising to the tyrant as well as to the victims. We can scarcely give autocrats credit for good motives: they are generally supposed to do wrong naturally and good by fear. They get credit for nothing save evil, and are rarely happy. It is almost a truism that a man who has power over his fellows abates few of his privileges except by force.

George Poletkevitch knew Russia and the Russian people well. He had taught the peasants, plotted against those in high places, and though forced to

flee, still hoped to do something on behalf of the Russian people.

He plotted even though so far from Russia, and was now seeking to get Alan to join him in the latest great scheme that was being hatched to further the aims of those who are known as Russian revolutionaries.

He called at Alan's chambers at the Albany and was welcomed cordially. This big man was always a welcome guest.

"Well," said Alan, "what news?"

"The same—always the same. Time and tide—time and tide."

Alan nodded.

"Shall you always be a dreamer, George Poletkevitch?"

"I hope so. This world is full of a sad reality for too many of us, and if it were not for our dreams we should never survive our calamities."

Alan was in a happy mood. He had hopes of Irene to cheer him—dreams as his companion would say—and he had no calamitous circumstances to bewail.

"Is that always true?" he asked. "I was thinking of the poorer classes."

Poletkevitch looked grave.

"They live in a dream—of drink, of good harvests, of their children helping them—of religion. Poor dreams! Poor dreamers!"

Alan offered his friend a cigar, which was refused, as Poletkevitch had long given up smoking in

order that he might have more money to devote to the cause.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" the big man suddenly asked.

"To-day?—to-morrow? What do you mean?" asked Alan in reply.

"You are no *flaneur.* Do you mean to throw yourself into politics in this country or—what?"

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"I have not yet decided."

The other man observed him closely.

"What are you thinking of doing?"

Alan shook his head; then he seemed to realise that his companion was not speaking without a motive, for he said quickly—

"Why? Have you come to suggest something?"

George Poletkevitch was too big a man to be rushed into a confession. Like most big men he took time. It is too much to expect a man to be as sharp as a needle and as strong as a crowbar at the same time.

"Perhaps," he said.

Alan smiled. He knew his man sufficiently well to be sure that George Poletkevitch spoke advisedly and would not ask him to act thoughtlessly.

"Tell me what it is."

"Life is too brief, the Russian Government too immense, for there to be more than one great purpose for me."

"Politics, of course—Russian politics."

"Exactly."

"Well, George Fedorovitch, I am half a Russian by birth, but in my hatred of tyranny and love of liberty I am all an Englishman. What do you think of doing? If you have a good case for the world, a good plan to pursue, I may help."

The Russian shook his head.

"A good case, a good plan," he repeated, and then looked with his big eyes straight at Alan, "but a better cause," he added impressively.

Alan felt that at least there was one man enthusiastic of a cause.

"I will tell you the case first. Tyranny of a vile description. You know just as well as I that a man or woman who dares to express an opinion contrary to those held by the ruling class is liable to be sent to Siberia, and may endanger the liberty of his friends, even though these poor creatures do not share the opinions of the exile. That you know?"

Alan acquiesced.

"Is it worth fighting to do away with this?"

"Yes."

"Let me tell you some more to encourage you. Twenty years ago—ten years ago even—the leaders in the movement against the Government were people of the upper or upper middle classes. To be a political prisoner was really to be stamped as an intellectual person. But now the working-classes are joining the movement. That makes a difference. The Government realises it. And so our rulers in Russia have organised a union of the Russian people."

"I have heard of it."

"Do you know what it is?"

"No."

George Poletkevitch paused a moment.

"It was founded by the bureaucrats to show Europe that the Russian people are as yet not sufficiently advanced to have a Constitution, and that political freedom would be understood by them to mean liberty to kill and steal. Pretty idea, is it not?"

Alan made no reply.

"This union of the Russian people," continued Poletkevitch, "is a union of the scum of the Russian people in alliance with the bureaucrats. The Union assault those who have influence with the people; they cry out—'No Constitution! God preserve the Tsar!'" The speaker paused and repeated with a grim quietness—"No Constitution. God preserve the Tsar! What do you say to that?"

"Thank God, I am not forced to live in Russia."

"Exactly. But we can strike a blow for those who do, can't we? We can't leave our own in the lurch, eh, Alan Leigh?"

Alan watched the speaker closely but said nothing.

"Do you know what these friends of the bureaucrats have done?" continued Poletkevitch. "They have killed brutally friends of mine, probably friends of yours."

Alan moved uneasily. His blood was not cold.

"Yes, Carl Reintze—"

"Reintze?"

Poletkevitch nodded.

"These hooligans have burnt human beings as well as buildings; they try to kill the intellectuals. They have slaughtered Jews by the hundred."

"Why?—why?"

"Because they are incited to do it. Because the police are saved a little spying if the riffraff can kill a few respectable people. And, my friend, this Union of the Russian people, which was born in dishonour and is bathed in blood, has been blessed by the Tsar himself!"

Alan got up and waved his hand as if to stop further relation of a story that moved him too fiercely. He walked across the room, muttering "Abominable! abominable!"

These chambers of Alan were handsomely furnished, and on one of the walls was a good copy of the picture by Elias Efimovitch Répine, The Return of the Exile from Siberia.

Alan looked at it.

"Pathetic," he said at length, "is so mild a word."

"Pathos is but the ante-room to the stage many of our friends tread," said his companion.

"Abominable!—abominable!" repeated Alan.

George Poletkevitch nodded his head as if he were content with what he had done.

"What are you going to do?" Alan asked.

"Do what all brave men do—fight."

"'It is hard to kick against the pricks,'" quoted Alan.

"We can't walk in the glare of the sunlight to be butchered on Vladimir's Day again," said Poletkevitch, "but we can fight in our own way."

"Ah!"

"And with our own weapons."

"You want me to join you?" said Alan.

"I do."

"I am in full sympathy with you; you know that?"

"It isn't enough."

"It certainly is not much. What do you want more?—money?"

"That is useful."

"That you shall have."

"Thank you. We need money badly. But we still want you."

"What will it entail?"

"You risk your liberty."

Alan nodded.

"Obviously. Life too, I suppose . . ."

"I don't think so. We have a plan; we want a man—you—to fill a most important *rôle*. I would do it, but I should fail, because I should be arrested before I had gone ten yards across the frontier. That is true of too many of us. You would not even be suspected."

Alan was silent a moment thinking.

He risked his liberty. There was no denying the splendour of the cause, though so little was achieved by these plots.

"If I succeed, will it accomplish much?" he asked.

"More than you dare to dream of."

"I cannot refuse—offhand," said Alan. "On the other hand I— You will wait a little for my answer, won't you?"

"A week?"

Alan nodded.

"Yes, I will decide in a week," he said.

But Irene? Alan was full of hope respecting her. It was soon to declare himself, but he was so touched by her pathetic attitude when he saw her that he felt impelled to ask her to let him comfort and protect her. And he thought he understood her heart. What would she say respecting this project of George Poletkevitch's?

Alan felt that life had allurements after all.

Love—a fight for freedom—

"Have you been to see Paul Drumitz's widow lately."

Alan started at the question. It was curious that as he thought of Irene his friend should mention her. "Why do you ask?" he said. "I was there a week ago."

"I should very much like to know what manner of man Paul Drumitz was."

Alan understood.

"You believe the—paper?" he asked quietly.

George Poletkevitch raised his hands and shook his head significantly. The gesture was unmistakable. "I affirm nothing definite," he said.

"He may have left papers."

"Exactly. But they would be safe with his widow."

George Poletkevitch said neither yes nor no. "I should like to find out," he said quietly.

"Why not ask her? Will you come now?"

The big Russian noted the eagerness of his companion, but made no comment. He rose slowly. "There would be no harm," he said.

So they went to call on Irene.

She was now in the furnished house which her husband had taken. But she looked far from happy. There was a hunted look in her eyes. She was paler and thinner and more like one harassed by a great trouble. George Poletkevitch observed this at once. Alan was struck by her demeanour to-day. She might have been a condemned woman—hopeless, her harp's last string broken. There was deep concern in his face as he greeted her, and she made an effort to smile.

"I have brought a friend," he said.

"George Fedorovitch," she said, holding out her hand and addressing him in the way of Russian familiarity. "You in England too?"

"It is pleasanter than Siberia," he said.

She seemed to freeze at the sentence, and Alan, remembering the note on the dead body, almost considered the speech a little *gauche*. But George Poletkevitch was not usually *gauche*.

They talked of common friends in Russia and elsewhere, and a little vaguely of Russian politics. Irene had little to say on this theme. She seemed rather to be glad to forget such a topic. "Has your cousin Stephan arrived yet?" Alan asked.

This was obviously another matter to make Irene

less comfortable. It may be that the occurrences of the past month or two had shaken her nerves. Alan felt at these signs of distress a great impulse to ask to be allowed to smooth her rough paths and assuage her griefs.

"Y—yes," she replied. "Last night."

She spoke with a brave air and then faltered. Her coolness and aplomb faded before a confusion she was unable to stem. Then she seemed to realise that she was betraying herself, betraying some emotion that was unnecessary, unseemly, indiscreet, and she blushed before the two men, one of whom observed her every movement critically, and the other with a warm sympathy.

"I'm glad," said Alan, feeling there was something he did not understand. "He will relieve you of a deal of trouble."

Irene did not answer.

"Your cousin," said George Poletkevitch in his deliberate way—"Stephan—er—?"

"Drumitz," said Irene. "He managed my husband's estates."

George Poletkevitch nodded, but looked very thoughtful.

"Does he take any interest in politics?" he asked slowly, and in a tone to suggest that the reply would leave him unmoved.

But again Irene betrayed nervousness. She acted badly, if actress she were; otherwise there was something more to be understood than these men knew. "The shock," said Alan to himself,

"must have been greater than I thought—brave little woman!"

To Poletkevitch Irene said—

"I—I don't know."

The Russian nodded his big head as before and looked inscrutable.

"I—should like to know," he said solemnly.

"I don't think so," said Irene, quickly, as if she would give a definite answer and be quit of the subject.

"You don't think he does?"

"No. I am almost sure he doesn't." Irene was speaking with an obvious nervousness, and both men wondered at it. Alan was made more sympathetic.

"I wonder if your husband left any papers, Madame Drumitz," said Poletkevitch—"I mean papers which it would be as well to conceal from the eyes of the police, for instance. You know he was one of us."

"Yes, yes," said Irene, quickly. "There were none I am sure—none at least that the police are likely to see."

"The police are very shrewd," said Poletkevitch.

"You mean the Russian police?"

"Yes." His hands went out in his expressive way. "They come anyhow, any disguise; but they know what they want."

"They never come here," said Irene.

"I am glad," said Poletkevitch. "They may try their tricks on you; I am a little surprised they have not already been to see you."

Irene's face had been changing colour during this

conversation in a manner to perplex both men. Suddenly she turned very pale and Alan was alarmed.

"What is the matter?" he said anxiously, as he went to her.

"Matter?" She looked at her face in the glass, and by an effort pulled herself together. "It's nothing. I seem to go pale like that now. It is perhaps—" she shrugged her shoulders as if to dismiss it lightly, but she could not refrain from sighing the next moment.

"You are tired," said Alan.

"I am afraid I have bored you—at least been discussing disagreeable topics with you," said George Poletkevitch.

She smiled back bravely.

"Not at all! I am all right again now."

But they did not stay long. Alan said—he was feeling at the end of his patience in allowing her to walk a lonely path when she seemed so troubled—

"I may call again soon. I want to see you particularly."

She looked him back for a moment as if to fathom his thoughts. And she seemed to understand.

"When you like," she said, but it was not a hopeful voice.

And when the two men had gone, she sank on a couch and wept.

George Poletkevitch was thoughtful as he and Alan walked away. Alan, too, was willing to be silent and think of things scarcely fit for casual conversation.

"Madame Drumitz," said Poletkevitch, after they

had walked some distance, "did she love her husband much?"

Alan did not answer. It was scarcely his province to know that, and he wondered why his companion put the question.

"She is not grieving over the death of Drumitz," said Poletkevitch, speaking as though communing with himself. "She may feel the manner of his death."

"That is what I think," said Alan.

"Yes. I should like to know who killed him."

Suddenly Poletkevitch caught hold of Alan and pulled him through an open gate and under the portico of a strange house. Alan was surprised, for the action was quick as well as unexpected.

Poletkevitch cautiously turned his head and watched a man walking on the other side of the road.

"Do you know that man?" he said.

Alan shook his head. "No."

"Vipoff, an old expert at spying. I wonder if he saw us."

"I don't think so," said Alan.

"We will watch him."

The two men turned and followed the police agent. They had not been observed by him, and he walked without any apparent concern towards the house inhabited by Irene.

The two men looked at each.

Vipoff looked up and down the street, but did not see the two men watching him, as they took care to

hide themselves. Then he rang the bell, and was shown into the same house where Poletkevitch and Alan had been but a quarter of an hour before.

"What luck!" said Alan. "We were just in time."

George Poletkevitch nodded, but said nothing. When he was alone he mused.

"Is it possible that Madame Drumitz knew who killed her husband — or did she connive at his death?"

CHAPTER VIII

> "Had we never loved sae kindly,
> Had we never loved sae blindly,
> Never met, or never parted,
> We had ne'er been broken-hearted."—BURNS.

ALAN began to be tormented about Irene. George Poletkevitch's action in a vague way hinted at something strange and uncomfortable. That Irene grieved was evident; but it was not the loss of a husband that was troubling her altogether. There was more behind.

Alan recalled the paper, and again wondered if the shame attached to the public branding of Paul Drumitz as a traitor was the cause of her sorrow.

It was a groping in the dark. A man finds it difficult to grapple with a motive of this uncertain kind because he makes allowances and refuses to dogmatise. A woman thinks of these things instinctively, and instinct is the essence of dogmatism. To be dogmatic is not necessarily to be correct, though it does make for confidence.

Alan lacked this confidence and was troubled all the more. Irene's grief became a great reproach to him. He felt not merely that he ought to, but must assuage it. He wondered if it were too soon to ask her to marry him.

If she would only give him the right to be near her he could comfort her and lighten her trouble. He felt he must see her and speak what was in his heart. There was neither use nor satisfaction in delay.

Alan Leigh was not a subtle being with a tendency to grope behind shadows. He was a clean, wholesome man, with likes and dislikes fairly clear, and the furtive and elusive only attracted him as curiosities. He was not one to puzzle his mind or continue to give his attention to things he found he could not grasp. This was probably why he ceased to try and understand why Irene grieved, and longed merely to comfort her.

He recalled, as he sat in his room the next day, the visit of the spy. He almost chuckled over the luck that he and George Poletkevitch had had in calling on Irene first, and that Vipoff had missed seeing them. He took it for granted that the police agent had gone with the object of getting papers left by Paul Drumitz. Irene, warned, would of course give him nothing, and would be on her guard. There was George Poletkevitch's proposal too. Alan was easily roused by Russian revolutionaries. He understood the depths to which administrative officials could sink; he knew to what extent bribery and corruption flourished and liberty languished. He could not be unmoved at the stories of cruelty and tyranny that he heard; and being moved he longed to help those who were oppressed.

But he was to risk his liberty, as George Poletke-

vitch had said. There was Irene to be thought of. The risk of liberty might be run in a good cause, but there was Irene suffering. He wondered if he were selfish. Some causes demand sacrifices, and perhaps George Poletkevitch had a scheme that promised well. But Irene full of trouble, heavy-laden! . . .

He must in any case speak first. He would ask Irene to marry him, and then perhaps they could work together in some way to aid George Poletkevitch and his friends.

A week had passed since Alan had paid his last visit to Irene, and during that time he had weighed over and over again in his mind the desirability of at once asking Irene to marry him. He could put off this grappling with fate no more. He must know what to hope for. Alan was no *flaneur*, as George Poletkevitch had aply said, and he had the Englishman's healthy instinct to do something.

He was a man of breeding and taste to observers as he set out from the Albany to go to Hampstead. He did not despise dress, and his clothes fitted him well. Most women like to see a man well-dressed just as men—even shabbily-clothed men—like to see well-dressed women.

Alan was a little nervous when he arrived at Hampstead. Irene welcomed him with a smile, but there were dark shadings below her eyes, and her face was pale. He, thinking of the one topic, was just a trifle awkward. And she went, if possible, a little paler at his movements. Perhaps she divined.

"Do you think," he said at length, "that the moment is of equal importance with the cause?"

She shook her head.

"The moment is of no importance in comparison with the cause, but sometimes it happens to be a necessary matter."

"There are things a man desires to do and he waits for the—opportunities."

"If the things are worth doing," she said, "I think opportunities would be made for them."

"Yes," he said. "I was thinking more of the appropriateness of time than what might be called opportunity."

She understood him well by now.

"Some things are never inappropriate," she said, "and some are always out of due season."

He paused.

"I wonder if you guess what I mean, Irene," he said, looking at her eagerly.

She would not meet his look, and her face was very pale. He hesitated, and the pause told the tale.

"Will you marry me?" he said with an effort.

She took a deep breath, looked before her as if reading an inexorable sentence with no show of faltering, and then slowly shook her head.

"No," she said very softly, and it was evident that she felt too much at that moment to say more.

He was clearly surprised: then an idea came to relieve him and give him hope.

"I don't mean now—at once. I can wait."

She shook her head.

"Not for me, Alan. I—I thank you."

She rose, sighed and breathed heavily. It was clear she struggled with emotion.

He rose too, not believing the refusal of course: it was too unexpected and at such a time one does not always express one's views accurately. He took her hand and tried to look in her eyes.

"You don't mean that, Irene?"

She let her hand remain but she met his look with some show of frankness, though there was an ominous twitching about the chin to betray emotion behind a weak dam.

"Yes, I do," she said very quietly.

"Irene," he said—and stopped.

"I can never marry you," she said.

"Never?" He repeated the word like one stunned, and pressed her hand feverishly.

"Never."

His look was so frank in his disappointment that Irene, catching a sight of it, choked with a great effort the answering emotion that arose in her and looked anywhere but at him.

"I love you, Irene—you know that," he said.

She made no answer. Words are so clumsy in some moments.

"You don't really mean it," he said pleadingly.

"Don't make it harder for me, Alan," she said with a voice adumbrating a feeling that might have given him hope if her refusal had been less clear.

He looked at her strangely.

"Forgive me," he said quietly. "But tell me, Irene, do you mean—never?"

She nodded: the word followed in a whisper—

"Never."

He released her hand and walked a step or two away, feeling he had missed his path, that he had stumbled heedlessly, and his own way seemed dreary and dark.

She said nothing, probably feeling afraid to speak, lest other conflicting emotions should get the better of her.

"I am sorry," he said at length; "you forgive me?"

Her look was ample testimony to his forgiveness and more. It perplexed him even. He would catch a glimpse of hope in it when she would merely soften the blow. But he fancied he caught a look that said, "I love you too," and that, with her refusal, was doubly trying.

They were both silent for a time.

"I had better go," he said at length.

She looked troubled, on the verge of tears even.

"You—forgive me?" she said.

He took her hand warmly.

"There is nothing to forgive. I—misunderstood."

There was a look in her eyes to deny it, but she said nothing. Some stern spectre in the shade commands us to silence sometimes when to say something would give great pleasure. Speech can make enemies, but silence, in spite of its golden boast, has left bleeding many a wound that would otherwise have been healed.

When Alan had gone, Irene gave way to the grief that surged within her. She flung herself on the couch and wept bitterly. She knew Alan loved her, and that was something; she knew she loved him, and that was something; but to love and be loved and never to meet as lovers. . . . Some are born to joy, some to bitterness. One laughs, another cries. . . .

As Irene sat there with a melancholy look on her pale face, a man, with a clean-shaven face and red hair, let himself into the house with a latch-key. Without ceremony he entered the drawing-room where Irene was.

"Anyone been?" he said.

"Alan Leigh," Irene replied.

Stephan Drumitz was silent for a moment.

"I think," he said, "we had better get married," and he gave a little chuckle.

Irene stared at him and then into the future, and shuddered.

Alan went back to his rooms like one dazed. He had made sure Irene would marry him—not at once perhaps, but after a decent interval had elapsed.

Refused! The refusal did not touch his pride; he felt no humiliation—that is the lot of the vain. Alan simply loved Irene and wished to marry her. She said "no." He felt a lost man in his rooms. He had during the past weeks—ever since he had heard of the death of Paul Drumitz—pictured Irene by his side. He was to comfort, protect and cherish her.

Refused! He asked himself why, and quickly added in humility that she did not love him. But the

look in her eyes. He would have sworn that was love. Yet she had refused, had said "no," had said "never."

But did she mean it? Women had said "no" before, and subsequently changed their mind. Her grief had so upset her that she was not to be taken too literally. Perhaps she thought she would do him no good as his wife since she had been branded, as it were, the wife of a traitor. And the look in her eyes . . .

He began to hope. She would change. He had been too precipitate. He should have waited for her to have recovered from the shock of the inquest and all its sordid details.

Then he recalled her "never." He shook his head. She had seemed to speak then as if she meant it. "Never." Did she really mean that she would never marry him? It wasn't possible. He felt sure she loved him. Of course: he had been too hasty. What made him go and ask her so soon? Her grief for Paul Drumitz, even though she did not love him much, must be allowed time to heal. He reproached himself. But she did not mean the "never." That was not possible. Irene—Irene— Her soft brown eyes were very much to Alan at that moment.

Did she really mean "never?"

He felt restless, and yet did not wish to meet anybody.

If only she had given him hope; if she had not said "never" so—so meaningly.

He boggled at the ultimate. There must be hope,

of course; he sank to despair and roused himself and sank again, and struggled in doubt.

By the evening post there came a letter which he opened feverishly, for it came from Irene. He almost danced before he read it, for he guessed it was a message of hope.

"DEAR ALAN,—I hope I did not hurt you by my answer to-day. Least of all things on earth would I desire to do that. I shall never forget what you said, nor shall I ever cease to treasure the memory of it, but I am afraid you may think I was not serious. You might imagine I shall change. For your sake, and so that you may think of me no more as one who may be your wife, I feel I ought to tell you that there is no hope whatever of that happening. I cannot marry you. I appreciate the honour you did me more than I can express. But that my answer was final is what you should know. I give my hopes and my prayers that you will be happy.—Yours gratefully and sincerely,

"IRENE DRUMITZ."

Alan was in doubt no more. The blow had, of course, fallen in the afternoon, and this merely drove it home.

She would never marry him now. Her answer was final. Never.

Alan stood up as if to fight his fate bravely. Disappointments are things to be dismissed as joy should be welcomed. Alan was prepared to bear himself like a man.

But he read the letter again; he tried even to read between the lines, and found his heart saying, "But perhaps, after all, she will change." Then he knew he faltered with his fate.

George Poletkevitch called about nine o'clock.

"I was wondering," said the Russian, "if you would come with me."

"Not to-night," said Alan.

"We have a meeting—"

"Not to-night."

"You can find something to occupy your mind if you come."

"It is in reference to what you mentioned the other day?" asked Alan.

"Yes."

Alan paused. Love had failed him. He could not mope. He put on his hat.

"I will come with you," he said.

"You understand all it entails?"

"I fear nothing, and will do anything."

George Poletkevitch looked at him, and noted the excited flush.

"I came at an opportune moment," said the big, observant man to himself.

CHAPTER IX

"Ideals have more power than Individuals."

GEORGE POLETKEVITCH and Alan walked along Piccadilly towards Sloane Street.

"Shall we ride or walk?" asked the Russian.

"Whichever you prefer."

"Let us walk."

Poletkevitch had a convenient knack of holding his tongue, and as he saw Alan was in a humour somewhat out of the common, he did not weary him with unnecessary remarks. The conventional cackle of some people at certain moments approaches criminality.

The two men turned into Hyde Park and continued their walk under the shadow of the trees, and chose winding paths with a curious caution. Russian revolutionaries can rarely dispense with prudence; it becomes second nature to them.

Alan said suddenly, as if a subject overflowed—

"Do you think Paul Drumitz was a traitor?"

"It is—possible," replied Poletkevitch.

Alan just nodded a kind of quiet agreement, and they walked on in silence.

"There was more in his death," said Alan, after a time, "than I understand."

George Poletkevitch shrugged his big shoulders.

"He is dead—what does the mystery matter?"

It mattered because of the living, of course; but Alan did not say so at once.

"Irene—his widow—feels it," he said, after they had walked on some distance farther.

"Some women are very sympathetic. I have known them weep because a scoundrel died."

"I—I asked her to marry me," said Alan, quietly.

"Ah!"

"She—refused."

George Poletkevitch said nothing. Silence is often more sympathetic than speech and sometimes more welcome.

"That is a dream unrealised, a hope blasted," said Alan, trying to speak bravely.

"Hope has sometimes more vitality than we give it in our despondent moods."

Alan shook his head.

"That does not apply to me—in this case," he said. "I have no hope there— And yet—"

"There is something you don't understand which would whisper 'Hope in spite of all.'"

Alan looked at his companion.

"What is it that whispers?"

"Something you don't understand."

"I think it is only hope not caring to die."

"Perhaps it is a wise instinct."

"No. There is no hope."

"I am sorry," said George Poletkevitch. "She is —I feel sure—a good woman, and they are not so

common as they might be. You—really wish to come with me?"

"Yes, yes; it is the best thing I can do."

"It is a good thing."

They turned out of Hyde Park into the road leading to Kensington, and got on an omnibus going to Hammersmith. They soon got off again, however, and walked through devious streets till they came to one unknown to Alan, though George Poletkevitch had managed to find it without difficulty, and after a careful scrutiny they entered a passage and were soon shown into a house where five men were already waiting.

The greetings were free and cordial, and Alan—though not known to the others except by name—seemed to be expected.

"Alan Leigh will join us—I answer for him," said George Poletkevitch.

The other men muttered a cordial welcome. They knew the prudence of Poletkevitch, and he had long been trusted as the Nestor of their party.

"Will he carry out the plan?" asked Alexander Gradoff. The reader will perhaps remember this dreamer who was one of the party whose meeting we watched in Russia.

"He does not know it yet," said Poletkevitch.

"Ah!"

"Any news?" asked Kopenouski of Poletkevitch. Mark Kopenouski was an engineer who could not refrain from reading such literature as *Mill on Liberty*, and trying to teach others the lessons he

drew from that and kindred books. Such a taste made his flight from Russia or capture inevitable.

"We await—the man," said Poletkevitch.

"Is all so far developed as that?" asked a young man, with a face that would have been handsome if it had not been for the flat nose, so common in Russia. We have seen this speaker before: Demetrius Krakoff.

George Poletkevitch nodded. He turned to Alan.

"You understand quite well what we are?" he said.

"I think I do," replied Alan.

"And you are content to be here?"

"Quite."

"I know your sentiments, but it is as well that we should all have a feeling of complete trust in each other."

Alan nodded. The others watched him.

George Poletkevitch continued—

"We do not take the trouble to meet here to express sympathy with those of our friends who suffer in Russia, or to shout vindictively against those who persecute them. We want to do something to help them."

The others muttered acquiescence.

"I am willing to do what I can," said Alan.

George Poletkevitch smiled. It was gratifying to his shrewdness and pleasant to the others, who wished to shake their new comrade again by the hand.

"There is a great deal you can do," said Appolon Baritz to Alan with a smile. This Baritz was a musician of great power as an executant. But he lived by music for liberty. He would meddle in politics and so lost his freedom. He regained that,

however, by the aid of friends, and played rhapsodies to his comrades. He was trying to compose a piece that should set forth the vileness of tyranny and its death. A-dreaming and a-dreaming! It was a height Appolon Baritz would never climb; a note he would never strike. Still he aimed high and sincerely, and for that, in this age of sordid motives and "paying" aims, he deserves his leaf of laurel.

"You are English?" asked Anton Bloch, a lawyer with revolutionary views and therefore out of his element in Russia. Fortunately he had means of support which made him independent of Russian laws. He had spent five years in Siberia and escaped during the Russo-Japanese war.

"Yes," said Alan, "but my mother was Russian, and I have estates in Tver."

"Ah!"

"I can vouch for our friend's sympathy," said George Poletkevitch, "and many of our comrades owe him a big debt. He helped Paul Vishnolov to escape—"

"Ah!" The exclamation came from Gradoff the dreamer, who took Alan by the hand and said: "My friend! My friend!"

"It was nothing," said Alan, modestly, but the others obviously regarded the matter in quite another light.

"But this plan," said Kopenouski, with a nod of approval and relish, and an expressive gesture that left the rest of the sentence easily imaginable.

"I think I am as keen as any of you," said Alan,

"in being desirous of furthering the cause of liberty in Russia. I only want to say this. I am willing to help you with money and I will risk my own liberty and life to help the cause; but I do not like wanton murder."

"Good—good," said three or four.

"Wanton murder," repeated Demetrius Krakoff, with a nod, "why wanton? The murderers should taste murder. 'By man shall his blood be shed'—what about that?"

"I don't like the idea of taking away the life from any human being," said Alan, "and bombs are too horrible a thing to deal with. I will not touch them."

"You will suit us. We shall suit you," said Anton Bloch. "We are not bomb-throwers. We believe in other measures. Of course, if some man behaved with particular brutality—" Demetrius Krakoff interrupted him with a bitter laugh.

"Then," continued the lawyer, "we may have recourse to the extreme penalty."

"I think," said George Poletkevitch, "that we may safely explain everything to Alan Leigh."

The other men had that hesitancy which prudence demands before a crucial and irrevocable step is taken. They looked at Alan, each somehow feeling he was perfectly satisfied.

"Yes, yes," said the warm Krakoff, and the others all nodded approval.

"Our plan involves no murder," said the big Poletkevitch addressing Alan. "We are bidding for the greatest thing we can confer on Russia. We don't

pretend that we shall make the whole of the Russian people wealthy and wise, but we do hope to educate them and give them freedom; and we mean to strike a blow for all those in a Russian prison and in Siberia, who have enlisted under the revolutionary banner. We want a free press, free speech, and an amnesty for all political prisoners. Is the cause reasonable and good?"

"Excellent," said Alan.

"And moderate," added Gradoff.

"Yes, moderate, but sane," continued Poletkevitch. "Well, we have, in conjunction with our comrades in Russia, concocted a plan by which we hope to be able to realise this demand."

Alan looked curious.

"Without bombs?" he asked.

"Without bombs."

There was silence for a moment.

"Free speech, a free press—liberty to breathe and think and talk—one's friends free, free, free. It is almost too much," said Appolon Baritz, with a wild gesture.

"You will play your part," said Demetrius Krakoff suddenly to Alan, leaning across the table.

"I should be glad to play any part in a scheme to gain such liberty for the Russian people—without bombs."

"Without bombs," repeated Kopenouski. "We don't want to hurt a soul."

Alan looked at George Poletkevitch.

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

"I will tell you what our plan is. It is a sign of our trust in you."

"You need not fear that I shall betray you."

"We mean to get possession of the son of the Tsar!"

There was silence. The men who were privy to this plot watched the effect of the news on Alan. They were indeed proud of their plan, and maybe looked for the flattering attitude of surprise and admiration. But Alan, not understanding all, wanted details.

"Possession of the son of the Tsar," he murmured, and looked at the men's keen faces round him. "To hurt him?"

"To hold him."

"I understand," said Alan, after a pause. "A hostage."

"Exactly."

Alan had a glimpse of the keenness of these men in the work they did. There was no lukewarmness, no half-heartedness. They were enthusiastic and eager, and the plot had captured them as something that promised them gifts, measurable perhaps in words but not in effect. It is only in big causes that these big emotions venture to tread.

"If we hold the little heir to the throne we will dictate to Nicholas Alexandrovitch," said Anton Bloch.

Alan nodded. He fully understood now how it was these men hoped to achieve so much even without bombs or a pistol shot.

"Your object is to gain possession of the child and then make his release conditional on the granting of a free press, free speech and a political amnesty?"

"Yes."

"There is obviously no desire to hurt the child?"

"It would hinder, not help, our plan to have him hurt."

"Then," said Alan, "I shall be very glad to help. I am not afraid. I see now why you said I risked my liberty—"

He could say no more, for the men clustered round him to shake hands, congratulate and shower thanks and blessings.

"I think," said George Poletkevitch, "I had better tell our comrade precisely what our share of the plan is, and see if he will do what we hope he will."

The others nodded acquiescence and Alan waited. He was now forgetting other matters and thinking in this dingy room of nothing but the flying of the angel of freedom over Russia.

"There is a committee in Russia," said George Poletkevitch, addressing Alan, "which is arranging everything except one detail. We, as you see and understand, are banished. We are too well-known to venture over the frontier, for we should not only be arrested at once but we should consequently ruin any scheme which depended on our co-operation in Russia. Do you begin to see?"

"I think I do," said Alan. "I shall not be suspected?"

"Precisely. We want someone to play a *rôle* who will not excite suspicion when he enters Russia."

"What is the *rôle*?" Alan asked.

"The details of the scheme are naturally in the hands of those in Russia. We cannot interfere, we can only advise to a certain point and naturally our co-operation is limited. But we are required to do one thing—find a man not likely to be suspected, who will enter Russia as a motorist. It is suggested he should motor from Paris or Berlin or some continental capital and arrange to be in Russia at a certain date. Then final instructions will be given him."

Alan was already conceiving himself to be the man in the motor. The plan was alluring. It was meant to help a cause he sympathised with and it was one that would obviously need nerve and entail risks.

"I—I should really like to know more," he said. "I quite understand this. I—if I am chosen—motor say from Paris to Russia as a tourist. When I reach Russia I receive instructions where to be at a certain time. Do you know any more?"

"Yes," said George Poletkevitch, "we do. We cannot tell you the exact place nor the exact time. We cannot tell you where you will be required to go or do. But we have friends in the Tzar's household. We have more friends near the throne and in government circles than many people give us credit for. When the children are in the grounds of the palace an attempt will be made to secure the person of the boy. You—" Poletkevitch stopped and Alan, after

a moment's hesitation, acquiesced. "You," the Russian continued, "will be ready with the car at a particular spot, and having received the precious cargo, will go direct to some place that will be pointed out to you. The boy will be taken off and another one substituted, so that if you are followed or stopped the scheme will not fail and you will then do your best to get out of the country. The boy will be well guarded, and then —negotiations will commence."

George Poletkevitch stopped. He was not a man given to superfluous verbiage and knew it was not necessary to go on speaking just because there was silence.

Nobody spoke for a moment. It was as if all waited a momentous signal—all save Alan. He knew they waited for him. He felt in a way honoured by their confidence. He realised that these men had a difficult thing to do—to choose a man whom they could trust and who would have certain qualities of daring, resource, nerve and self-sacrifice, besides being not too closely identified with the revolutionary party.

Alan looked round the table easily. The keenness expressed by the faces of his companions interested him. He was able to take a curious satisfaction in observing their looks now because his mind was made up.

"I shall be ready when the time comes," said Alan, quietly.

The others, however, were not quiet at that remark. They were demonstrative in their joy and hid none of their emotions. Alan would have preferred them

to take the news more quietly. But when the dam bursts one cannot expect the water to run without haste. These men had schemed to bring about something which gripped their hearts and put its fingers on every emotion. They were sanguine too and hoped so much from this plan. A man who adopts a plan on which he places no hope is stupid. It is the solace of the martyr, the comfort of the pioneer and the sweet accompaniment to the song of life.

George Poletkevitch shook Alan heartily by the hand.

"I hoped you would," he said. "It is a good thing you do."

"If I can only do it well."

"Yes. Yes. There is always a chance of a mishap. You will need—reticence, care, daring, and—if only success comes—!"

The exclamations were in the nature of a reverent prayer.

"We shall want money," said Anton Bloch, who was practical.

"What for?" asked Alan.

"The car, et cetera, et cetera."

Alan paused a moment.

"I will make myself responsible for that," he said.

Appolon Baritz took his violin that was lying on a chair near and played. The others stopped speaking, fell into odd attitudes and drank in the music as if a magic being had assumed control over them and fed them as he would.

The theme was fully reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's "1812." It was an obvious variation of it. But one felt that the Russian national anthem stood for tyranny. There was dolour in it and pain and grief and darkness. It wrestled with a wilder hymn to Liberty that had the ardour and glorious swing of the Marseillaise; and those who heard turned like men in a mad moment of supreme ecstasy. Freedom's air struggled and conquered, and Appolon Baritz drew from his instrument the piercing notes of victory, and his hearers felt they had assisted at a fight historic—the defeat of tyranny in all forms. It died without a sympathetic tear, and on its grave arose the glorious figure of Liberty smiling and triumphant.

When the music stopped nobody spoke: scarcely anyone moved. Suddenly Alexander Gradoff sobbed—he was a great dreamer and felt deeply.

After a while the meeting was broken up and each man went away swiftly and alone. For this night at least Alan was undisturbed by longings for Irene. Ideals have more power than individuals.

CHAPTER X

"Change for a Shilling."

ALAN began to feel himself able to look the world well in the face and smile at the future. It was the momentous nature of his political daring that had accomplished this. Irene's refusal of him had struck him a heavy blow but his mind was refused its wailing ground. There was no time for weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Despair was flung out by action—as all sensible men have discovered to their comfort. One set of emotions would have sat by the drooping trees, avoided mankind and painted the hollowness of life and man's harvest of disappointment in a bitter and bleak picture. But the need to be up and doing, the call of other men in trouble, the weak cry of the struggler in distress, the moan of the fallen had allowed Alan no time for moodiness. He had to think of other things. So the blow lost half its weight and Alan was surprised at times that he bore himself with so little repining. He cheated himself a little for when he thought of Irene he suffered. He could not understand that "never."

His thoughts on this topic always ended, as they must, in the clouds, and he groped blindly. Then faintly through the shadows he re-read her letter. He accepted his lot with a sigh. Disappointments

are the hills we surmount, not the avalanches that bury us.

The plot for the abduction of the Tsar's little son occupied a good deal of Alan's thought. The risk, the carefulness, the momentous nature of the conspiracy took hold of his imagination more and more. He was glad there was no bloodshed in the scheme. Not that he recoiled from the spilling of blood in every circumstance, but he felt men might suffer and attempt much before resorting to slaughter.

He found himself thinking out details—how he would manage here, how there. He studied the geography of Europe and measured his route on maps.

In the midst of one of his meditations as he walked along Piccadilly—a curious place one would imagine for a man to get absorbed in matters removed from traffic and the dodging of people and motors—he met Countess Brinski.

She was just turning out of Bond Street where she had been shopping, and there was delight in her eyes as she saw Alan taking off his hat. He was clearly not too absorbed in Russian politics.

She explained that she was about to call a hansom and drive back to her hotel, but Alan persuaded her to walk towards the Park.

She was certainly in love with him. Her heart was not so deep a thing as Irene's, but she was a most attractive woman. At the pinch, perhaps, she—but who will dare assert he will always be found true when the pinch comes?

"Still keen on politics?" she asked, as they sat together in the Park.

"Yes."

The countess dressed with excellent taste and appeared to be, as she sat there swinging a daintily-shod foot, far too much of a society woman to be interested in the undercurrents of Russian politics. Her interest, of course, was Alan, not politics. Her question was, however, not a casual one; there was too serious a look in her eyes for that.

"I, too," she said, "feel as though I ought to do something. You have an eloquent tongue, Alan—I am afraid you are responsible for this."

"I?"

"Yes. Things are awful in Russia, aren't they?"

He was surprised as well as pleased to hear her talk in this fashion. The reference to his "eloquent tongue" may have passed him by without sticking, but the tribute to his influence was clear. The countess was clever as well as pretty.

"Yes," he said. "And are you really serious?"

"I am beginning to see that freedom and tyranny are not mere catchwords. One's apt to take the abstract names as exaggerations, don't you think? In Russia every now and then we used to be a little shocked at the story of some stupid brutal official, but we didn't call it tyranny. We found that stupid officials in other countries behaved almost as badly on occasions. I am speaking from my own point of view of course. The cry for liberty, when we heard it, seemed something false. Now!—Perhaps it is living

out of Russia, perhaps—" she hesitated and looked up at Alan, who was watching her curiously. "At any rate, the old ideas have gone. I understand you now and all those who work with you."

The countess dropped her voice a little dramatically, and poked her sunshade in the ground, which was probably meant to emphasise either the sincerity of the repentance or the earnestness of the proselyte desiring an opportunity for zeal.

Alan was delighted. That the cause which was now dear to him had obtained a recruit owing to *his* influence was something congratulatory: the addition of the sympathy of a beautiful and distinguished woman is more than congratulatory—it approached the dangerous.

"I am glad," said Alan, and his face bore testimony to the truth of his words. "No man can think decently of mankind and regard tyranny with anything but loathing."

She nodded, still making little holes in the ground with her sunshade.

"It is so hard to fight against the officials in Russia, isn't it?"

"Our turn must come," he said in a voice that betrayed to the acute woman something of magnitude in the background.

"Can I help?" she said humbly.

Alan was greatly astonished.

"Those who fight for freedom for the Russian people can't afford to refuse an ally; but if they could they would not pass by your aid. Only—"

"Well?"

"As a conspirator—"

"If *you* are," she said, diving quickly with a woman's intuition and being wonderfully alert for the sake of the man she loved. Alan a conspirator!—her heart gave a leap. She became fearsome at once and had to act exceedingly well not to betray more than she desired should be observed.

"I?" He gave a little jerk with his head. "Well, it is a good cause."

She wanted to ask questions and she feared discovery. She talked of Liberty, but it was Alan she dreamed of.

"Are you running risks?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"One does that crossing the road in London."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, turning to him almost impulsively.

Alan paused a moment before replying. "I suppose we shall have another snatch at liberty."

"I feel sure you are going to run a great risk," she said, speaking anxiously.

"I don't risk very much," he said with the faint note of insensibility in it.

The countess noticed the absence of feeling and wondered what had caused it, but before she spoke again, Alan suggested tea. Perhaps he felt the conversation was treading on ground slightly perilous.

They had tea, and the countess proved for the rest of the afternoon a most agreeable companion.

Alan saw her to her hotel and promised to call with a book treating of the Russian revolutionary movement. He certainly brought away a most pleasing impression of her. His old desires seemed revived. He recalled them and they reflected credit on his taste. He scarcely dared to think of her as his wife. He had other things to occupy his mind, and a wife— There was a veil drawn over that chamber in his soul that was not to be rent yet. Still the countess was most attractive, and her style was excellent. Not only the men but the women had stared at her. She was sympathetic too. And it was odd how she had been made quite zealous for revolution in Russia, solely by what he had said. That was odd —but was it? She had always shown a distinct liking for his society and he had been on the verge of—

Alan stifled his thoughts. Irene's image crept up and he threw a cloak, as it were, over that. It was a world too shadowy at present. The plot!—There was one thing tangible and promising. That allured and offered satisfaction. If only he succeeded there, he might— Well, there would be plenty of time to consider what he would do after that. He began to hunt up some pamphlets and books setting forth the views of the leaders of the Russian revolutionary movement, which he had promised to lend the countess.

She herself was perplexed. Diving into a sea of motives, she swam awkwardly and found no con-

venient resting-place. Yet somehow she felt hopeful. There were things to perplex her of course, and she was afraid of trusting too much to appearances this time, because she had made so sure before, and the disappointment had been great. But—

She sat in her room for some time before she took off her hat. She sighed and wondered. Of one thing she was certain: she had to become a friend of the Russian revolutionary movement. She disliked cruelty, and liberty was a most attractive word. Besides, she was willing to adopt a good many theories and espouse many causes for the sake of winning Alan Leigh. Religions have been changed from similar motives. Set our emotions on edge and we will show you what we will undergo.

The countess recalled Alan's voice, his manner, his look. Then of course she began ruminating. He had been charming before: he could not have behaved more promisingly than he did at Lady Clarice's, yet the result was barren. Of course something had happened. Irene Drumitz! She had heard of Alan's love for her of old—was it the fact that she was a widow and eligible again that made Alan change so suddenly? The furniture of the Carlton was not able to answer the question, and the countess felt conjecture was a very disturbing thing and peculiarly unsatisfying.

But Alan had been agreeable—most agreeable. Did he mean anything? Or would Irene Drumitz creep in between them again?

The countess rose. There was determination in

her attitude and a plan in her head. In the noble art of seizing the mate desired, many a woman can give points to the daring lord of creation. There are heights to which she can rise (as well as depths to which she can sink) that the plain, straightforward, proposing man is ignorant of. What is his "Will you marry me?—I love you" to her glances, sympathies, enthusiasms, drooping eyelids and man-traps? Mate-hunting would be an exciting sport if it were not so momentous.

Countess Brinski rose as one who says, "That is the excellent way." She had got an idea and did not hesitate about carrying it out. She would go to Irene Drumitz and ferret out if there was anything to bind Alan in that quarter. There was a directness in the course that was attractive.

The countess looked at the clock on the mantelpiece: it was too late to call that day. She rang for her maid. Now that she had decided on a course of action, there was no need to sit thinking with her boots on.

The next day she called on Irene at Hampstead. She had been once before, but there was no information to be got then, for Alan had not spoken, and Irene betrayed no dreams of her own.

The Laurels was a ten-roomed house in a neighbourhood where such houses were common. It was furnished when Paul Drumitz had first taken it, and the little changes of arrangement and small additions made by Irene did not in any degree

detract from the essentially English character of the interior.

A smart maid answered the door and showed the countess into the drawing-room. "She thought her mistress was in but she was not sure."

The countess looked round the room with the swift, observant eyes of a woman of her class. She could appraise and value and reduce to society's common denominator with celerity and facility. "Money is something of an object to the people who live here," was her comment, "but they don't pinch." Irene's influence was not speedily noticeable to the visitor and would have betrayed little in any case.

When the door opened and the countess rose to greet Irene she was surprised to see a man.

He bowed gravely and looked a trifle awkward, though his bearing, as it struck the countess, was courteous and not servile.

"I surprise you?" he said, with no smile on his pale face. "Excuse me—the Countess Brinski?"

"Yes."

"You speak French?" His English came correctly but slowly.

"Oui."

He bowed and continued to speak in French.

"My name is Drumitz. I am the cousin to—"

The countess bowed slightly.

"I remember," she said, but she was not quite sure of his footing. "I came to see Madame Drumitz."

"She is unfortunately out at present, but she may return at any moment: won't you wait?"

He certainly spoke like a gentleman and his French accent was good. But it was not for a *tête-à-tête* with this man that the countess had called, and she hesitated whether to go or stay. But there was the possibility of Irene returning at any moment, so she stayed and had the interview—the momentous interview—with Stephan Drumitz.

There was a kind of furtive look about the man that made the countess at first feel a little uncomfortable. He talked easily but he seemed to be watching her too closely for an ordinary host. She was a capable woman and she observed him too, while talking banalities in elegant French.

He seemed to be saying to himself: "What has this woman called for?"

She was saying to herself: "This man is enigmatic. I wonder if he could enlighten me respecting Irene."

So they played their game.

"Your cousin Irene has borne her trouble very bravely," said the countess.

"Yes," he replied.

"Will she settle down in England now or go back to Russia?"

"Settle!" He shrugged his shoulders. "It is difficult to say. To-day she might like England, but who can say what she might think next year?"

"Do you say that because you know her, or because you have had much experience with women generally?"

"I find it difficult to say what anybody will do twelve months ahead."

"Perhaps," said the countess, "she might marry again."

There was certainly a dangerous flash in his eye for a brief moment as she fired that shot, but it departed almost instantly. The countess found him a curious man to read.

He looked at her deliberately before speaking and seemed to ask himself why she had made the remark.

"Perhaps," he said almost mechanically, feeling that if there was any motive in the remark the topic would be pursued. Stephan Drumitz had obviously some measure of shrewdness.

"You don't think it—likely?" said the countess.

"I?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?"

She wondered if he were fencing with her and he was asking himself what she was driving at. What did it matter to her if Irene married again?

Then it came to him like a dart—jealousy.

Stephan Drumitz was no fool when it came to dealing with people.

"They say," he said, speaking grimly, "that a prosperous widowhood is woman's paradise."

She shook her head.

"You are too wise to believe that," she said.

"She has liberty."

"What woman wants it?"

He was silent a moment.

"Perhaps her husband has already been chosen, eh?"

"One would have to ask her that."

"Yes."

The countess tried hard to read the face of her companion, but failed to get much guidance. She had to make her own pace.

"Mr Leigh was very helpful, I believe, at the time of your cousin's death—do you know him?"

"I have heard his name, but I have not met him."

"Yet he called here often."

"Oh!"

"They were old friends — Irene and he, I believe."

"Ah!"

The countess did not appear to be making much headway with this man with the restless blue eyes. Neither was she sure whether he fenced with her deliberately or was merely a man possessed of discretion.

It was by accident she stumbled on a theme to set this man's eyes alight.

"Have you any sympathy with the revolutionary movement in Russia?" she asked.

He paused before replying, but she could make no guess whatever respecting his thoughts. He shrugged his shoulders, watching her keenly the while. Then a swift expression of satisfaction lit his face for a moment—only a moment, for Stephan Drumitz seemed able to preserve a stolid countenance when he wished.

"The old order must change," he said, speaking slowly as if weighing his words carefully. "And you?"

"I? What can a woman do?"

"A great deal—a very great deal," he said, speaking more quickly, and with a zest that had not marked his previous utterances.

The countess was certainly stirred by the warmth of his speech. Its suddenness seemed to betray a frankness that invited confidence.

"Of course some women have done much."

"Perhaps," he said, "the Countess Brinski will rival them."

She shook her head.

"No, no, I am not heroic. Of course I sympathise and—but is it safe to mention these things to you?"

He nodded expressively. He thrust out an arm with a striking gesture—a little too theatrically, perhaps, but it had its effect.

"I would second you in anything. I — I, for many reasons, keep from the society of politicals in England—my cousin's death, you remember—but I would help them. Are you a worker?"

"I should not call myself that," she said, "but I am thinking of—doing what I can."

"And Mr Leigh?"

"He is keen."

"Yes, yes. He must be. We must all be keen. And what is being done? Is it mere sympathy?"

"I don't know. I think there is something brewing. Mr Leigh—but of course I know nothing."

"Not yet?"

"Not yet!"

"But you will know?" He spoke anxiously.

"Perhaps. I—I want to do something."

"If only I could too; but it is not possible for me to take a — prominent part. If you were to do anything, perhaps I could help — quietly and secretly, I mean."

She hesitated. Secrecy rarely leaves us cold.

"I am afraid I shall do nothing myself," she said.

"But you may help others: you will know what is being done?"

"Perhaps. I am not yet even recognised as a —conspirator."

"It is a glorious *rôle*. You fight for freedom for a whole people. You would bring sunshine to millions who have never felt it. You will help them, I can see. The cause is irresistible. You feel that, don't you?'

"I—I think I shall do what I can."

There was a pause. Stephan Drumitz was thinking.

"So there is a rumour that my cousin's widow may marry again?" he said, throwing his line.

"Rumour? I didn't mention anything of a rumour, did I?"

"Pardon me. I misunderstood. It was a conclusion of your own."

The countess shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"One's spare moments are bombarded with conclusions on all sorts of topics."

"And Mr Leigh is the prospective husband, eh?"

"I did not say that."

"No, no. I beg your pardon if I suggested it. It was a mere—conclusion on my part."

He watched her keenly to see her emotional little flags flying. He was piercing in his observation was this Stephan Drumitz, and the countess began to experience an uncanny feeling with this pale-faced, red-haired, blue-eyed man meeting her so intimately. He was not given to smiling, but his last phrase had a touch of a sardonic humour.

The countess was attracted by the man's subject if repelled by his manner. The topic of Alan and Irene was not one to be skipped.

"Your cousin may surprise you," she said.

"With a marriage?"

"Yes." The countess was most desirous of asking leading questions and yet as she framed them they melted into the vaguest of remarks. He helped her prodigiously with a stroke of directness.

"And suppose she married this Mr Leigh," he said, keeping his eyes fixed on hers, "what would you say?"

The countess tossed her head. After all, she could escape nets of that kind.

"Send her my felicitations," she said.

"But you would rather not, eh?" That was the stroke that showed his reading of her and made her wonder a little at his shrewdness and be a little fearful lest he should try to mar what she desired. His directness came next and startled her by its suddenness.

"You would like—you forgive me, countess?—to marry Mr Leigh yourself, eh?"

It was useless to be offended and folly to make a pretence of it. That he spoke with a motive was now quite clear to the countess, and if he had a game to plan so much the better for her. She could not, of course, acquiesce in his last remark, but it had to be handled delicately: there was more in the situation than the countess understood and she wished to learn all she could.

"Monsieur!" she said, "I have my freedom."

"What woman wants it?" he retorted quickly, recalling her own phrase.

She bowed.

"It strikes me that Irene can't be dull with you at hand."

He ignored the remark.

"If I am frank with you, will you be frank with me?" he said.

"That sounds desperate. Frankness is an appalling thing in our complicated society."

"I will be frank. I think we two can help each other. If — if, countess, you do not want Mr Leigh to marry my cousin, I may be able to help you. I can help you. Will you help me?"

Countess Brinski was faced by a man who knew the value of clearness and the strength of a woman's desire.

"I can't allow you to suggest for a moment, Monsieur Drumitz," she said, "that I wish to marry —any man."

"Pardon, countess. I was *gauche*. Of course not. But—will you help me?"

Her gesture was expressive: words were unnecessary.

"Precisely," he said. "You can help me. In return I—" He hesitated. "Should I do anything to hinder anything in the way of a marriage between my cousin and Mr Leigh—?"

"You do not wish to bring about such a match?"

"On the contrary."

"Ah! perhaps you wish to marry Irene yourself."

His laugh was a soured arrangement.

"Perhaps," he said grimly. "But I want your help."

"If I can help you, I—will," she said.

He seemed content.

"You can help me," he said. "I cannot explain everything but I want to get in touch with Russian revolutionary aims without personally joining any group. If I could join by deputy, for instance—"

The countess nodded.

"Me?" she suggested.

"Exactly. I must remain in the background. I have my reasons. My cousin's death—you recall the details?"

"Not all."

"There was the paper. He was called a—traitor." He shook his head. "I don't believe it. There is a mystery somewhere. But you will forgive me if I avoid details, for our compact need be of little extent. I want you to let me know what the revolutionaries

are doing. I may be able to help at some important point, but that, of course, I cannot definitely promise."

The countess hesitated. Compacts can be dangerous things.

"You must remember," she said, "that I know practically nothing of the revolutionary movement."

"You can join it."

"To please you?"

He shook his head and his blue eyes stared at her coldly.

"To please—Mr Leigh," he said.

"Monsieur!"

Stephan Drumitz threw back his head with a jerk of impatience.

"Pardon, countess. I blunder because I am frank. If I want a thing I do not hide my desire when there is no necessity. If you do care for a—man, there is no shame. And *he* is a desirable man. I can help you perhaps by keeping a rival from your path; I will do my best. But I want help in another direction. There is no harm in what I ask. My late cousin was no traitor; but he was killed. I will solve the mystery of his death: that is one of my missions. But I must help the revolutionary movement too, and yet for reasons which I cannot explain I must keep in the background. You and I join the movement, only you represent both of us—that is all. I believe I shall yet find the murderer of my cousin and I shall find him—or her—through keeping in touch with the revolutionaries whom hitherto I have always helped openly, but

can only assist secretly in the future. I suggest that you join the movement at once. Mr Leigh would inform you of what is proposed and—well, give me good information and I feel sure I can promise to keep Mr Leigh from Irene."

The countess rose. She had some delicate feeling about saying, "This is our bargain," but she was willing to agree to the terms nevertheless. She had already decided to join the revolutionary movement, and to tell this man what was spoken of there—but suppose he was a police agent—a spy?

"You are really in sympathy with the revolutionaries?" she asked.

"I have been one of the most ardent. The horrible death of my cousin—we were very much attached to each other and I managed his estates—made me swear I would have nothing more to do with them. Now who knows whether it was indeed a political feud or—" He shrugged his shoulders. "So I keep away from them and yet I would find his murderer if possible."

"You are faithful?" she said.

"Even in a bargain. And you?"

She nodded.

"I keep my word."

"You will do what you can."

"It may be so little."

"It is all I ask."

"If you are satisfied—"

"The more I know the better for my purpose. It may strengthen my—influence with Irene."

"I think I won't wait," said the countess, holding out her hand.

He took the hand.

"This recognises our—compact."

She smiled as if to carry it off with an easy air.

"I will do what I can," she said.

"So will I. Thank you, countess. And we shall both be discreet, eh? You will, of course, not mention my name?"

"There will be no need."

"But I must see you. Suppose I call on you in, say, a week's time? You could always write if you found it necessary."

"I am at the Carlton. I could drop you a line when I have anything to tell."

"My power over Irene," he said, "will increase in proportion as I get good information from you."

"It sounds like a conspiracy," she said, still leaning to the face-saving view.

"It is nothing of the kind," he retorted seriously. "Mere change for a shilling."

"We must trust each other."

"It is the essence of all dealing between those who—"

"Give change for a shilling," she said.

CHAPTER XI

"So clap hands and a bargain."
—King Henry V.

The Countess Brinski after her interview with Stephan Drumitz was excited. From a world of doubt, of placid movement and a promise of the second best, she was suddenly transferred to one quite different. The most desirable visited her, and seemed to hold out a gorgeous promise, and her movements were far from calm. The compact with Stephan Drumitz made her gasp a little as she thought of it the next day. Not that she repented. On the contrary. But she wondered that she had dared to do such a thing: she was surprised at herself—almost agreeably. To have refused such an understanding (the word was not found too easily), would have been not only unwise: it would have been stupid. She had nothing to do but tell the man gossip and he kept Irene from Alan. Could he? She was dubious for a moment. He looked to be a bit of a villain—ugh! She trembled with a weird creepiness. His red hair and pale face—well, if Irene chose to have a cousin like that about her she must pay the penalty. Perhaps he wanted to marry Irene himself. The countess felt pleased at the thought. There was satisfaction

somehow in the idea; it removed Irene from Alan's path. If he only would. But he did look a queer creature, and he certainly was no fool with a woman.

And Alan. The countess was more hopeful. She could never get out of her head the seeming willingness that Alan had shown at Lady Clarice's. A woman having once felt a man's regard will never lose hope till some barrier makes it futile. And the countess loved Alan. Her love was not of the purest order—it was more inclined to desire and want rather than to give. But that is a common brand.

The countess was further encouraged to think fortune was smiling on her, for Alan called that day. Her conversion to the reforming party in Russia was complete, and, one might almost add, sincere. It was certainly as sincere as the countess herself could recognise it, for it is really difficult for some people to understand well either sincerity or themselves.

She was moved by Alan's stories; she hated tyranny as she had never hated it before. She sympathised with Alan's enthusiastic hopes, and the well-expressed and well-tuned sympathy of a pretty woman is an agreeable thing for a man to witness and experience. The countess said that from henceforth she was a reformer. Of course she laid her conversion at Alan's door and promised to read all the revolutionary literature he put into her hand.

He, feeling himself a person of influence, was pleased. He had sense to realise he was flattered, but he didn't mind that: who minds being flattered

by a pretty woman? That she will condescend makes it doubly welcome.

Alan showed his serious views and intentions without citing details and the countess pressed for more information. She was very, very keen: she must not be starved of knowledge or opportunity now. She even gave Alan a cheque made payable to self for fifty pounds and begged him to send it to headquarters in aid of the cause.

If the countess were not sincere she certainly deluded herself.

Alan handed the cheque with some little pride and satisfaction to George Poletkevitch, who said, as they sat in Alan's room, that money was very welcome.

"She is rich," he said, "and we want money badly."

"She may give more," said Alan.

"I think you might make it your business to see she does."

"I will do my best."

George Poletkevitch was wondering why it was that the Countess Brinski had given this money to aid the revolutionaries, and he was sufficiently acute to find a reason. Besides, the countess was a connection of his, though he did not mention this, as he had changed his name more than once, and he was unknown to the Countess as George Poletkevitch.

"Are you ready to start at a few hours' warning?" he suddenly asked Alan.

"To—Russia?"

"Yes."

"I will get ready, if that is advisable."

George Poletkevitch nodded.

"It is advisable."

"What do I want?"

"A gladstone. You will be motoring."

"Exactly. And is the route decided?"

"You start from Berlin. A—chauffeur will join you."

"I understand. And the car?"

"It has been provided."

"Somebody is generous."

"Our cause has known the height of self-sacrifice."

"I will, of course, pay all expenses on the journey," said Alan.

"Russia will be grateful," said George Poletkevitch, simply.

"At present," continued Alan, "I simply await orders. When I get them I go at once to Berlin."

"And all then will be clear. At present we must wait till all is prepared in Russia. We are ready here, they are ready in Berlin, but it is more difficult in Russia."

"We have patience."

"A Russian without patience—" George Poletkevitch shook his head. "The Israelites under Pharaoh were not more patient than the Russian people under their taskmasters."

When the two men parted, the big man said: "We

want money—*encore de l'argent, toujours de l'argent.*" He paused, and then added quietly, though he seemed to add weight to any remark he uttered: "The Countess Brinski might give more. You will thank and tell her."

Alan was certainly keeping in close touch with the countess, which was a condition desired by her, and not found in any degree irksome by him. He found himself the next day almost saying to himself: "I've nothing to do; I will call at the Carlton."

It was a mere inclination. He certainly did not speak the words, but in the embarrassment of ample time he looked in the direction of the Carlton. Looks show which way the thoughts turn. But he did not go there that day at any rate, for as he walked up Regent Street he met Irene.

It was the first time they had seen each other since Alan had proposed. Her cheeks flushed, but in her eyes there was a look that seemed to seek forgiveness. It was ever Irene's way. Alan, good lover, good gentleman, took her hand, and, avoiding a gaiety that would have emphasised a trouble or scorned it, was easily natural. She was over anxious lest he was hurt, and for some minutes could not avoid furtive glances to glean the truth. But he seemed so frank that her tension fell, and they looked at shops like very good friends.

He could not take her letter as final with her walking by his side. Besides, he seemed to guess a feeling that Irene tried to hide. She had a look in her eyes that told him too much. He made excuses for the

letter. Something had happened at the time—there was a reason which no longer existed.

As they shook hands to part he said—

"Must I take that letter as final?"

She looked at him almost piteously, and nodded her head.

"Can't you recall it?"

"No. Forgive me and—forget me."

He shook her hand warmly.

"Forgiveness—yes. Forgetfulness—no."

Then they parted.

Alan was much upset. He had met this decision quite frankly before, so that the reaffirmation of it was not a novel sensation or a great blow. But the sight of Irene—her presence, her personality—had a great effect on him, and he could not throw off the idea that somehow she cared for him, but was prevented from marrying him from some cause which he could not understand.

There was no doubting the finality of her answer now. She was not to be his wife, and it would be folly for him to think of such a thing. He went about like a man fighting with melancholy.

But he recovered. There was a sweetness to remember, even if it tantalised. Irene was Irene, and it was something even to have loved her. The finer the loved the better the lover. It is quite easy to cast affection on the little worthy.

The countess was not to round that day too comfortably, for by the last post she received a note.

"DEAR COUNTESS,—Mr L. was with I-e-e to-day. I will play my part as soon as you can give me information. Have you no news?—Yours truly, S. D."

The countess read the letter two or three times, as if further reading would make it less distasteful, more palatable. How crudely blunt it was! No circumlocution, no extenuating circumstance, no excuse of any kind. "Mr. L. was with Irene to-day."—Alan and Irene!

The countess was not of that absurdly jealous order that shows no confidence in one's self and no trust in another, but for her to picture Alan and Irene together was to chill her blood and make the night seem blacker. Her emotions were somewhat deadened. She felt heavier, denser, not only mentally but physically. Her heart was troublesome.

Alan and Irene! Why did the man send such a picture? He might have asked for news, if that was what he wanted, without saying those two were together. She began to feel ugly. Did Alan really care for Irene? Was that the reason that had made him change when he seemed on the point of proposing?

This communing was not only unprofitable, it was disagreeable. The countess possessed intelligence, and told herself she knew she had to fight. If there had been no battle, there would certainly have been no compact with Stephan Drumitz. Her ability was equal to the situation. People are always more likely

to get what they want when they try and help themselves. The average society woman has learnt that lesson long ago, but the modest provincial thinks the well-born lady never pushes nor reaches forward! Not all go to Corinth—or to Drawing-Rooms.

The Countess Brinski took pen, ink and paper and wrote to Alan. She was quite anxious to see the books he was to get for her. Had he got them? She saw there were curious doings in the south of Russia, but couldn't understand what was really the matter. Would he call and explain?

Alan was not displeased at the letter. It gave him something to do, and commissions for a pretty woman have been sought for. Alan got the books and pamphlets he wanted, and went the next afternoon to the Carlton.

The countess was charming in manner and most attractive in dress. Of many arts she was obviously a mistress.

"I feel I am getting more and more enthusiastic," she said.

"That will do you no harm."

"I hope it may do me good," she said.

"It will. When we fight for others we always do ourselves an excellent turn."

They looked at the literature together. Both understood Russian, and so the pamphlets issued from the *Imprimerie et rédaction de l'Ouvrier Israelite* at Geneva and from other sources were intelligible to them both.

The countess seemed seriously interested. Alan

was very keen, and the countess felt more and more the desire to possess and be possessed by him. If she failed to win him now she was piling up for herself a greater trouble than if she had made no effort to attract him. But we should be fools to refuse to fight, because the failure would be all the bitterer for the hopes raised during the struggle. This is no world for cowards and shirkers. The countess knew the prize was worth the struggle and failure not worth a thought. Also she remembered her compact.

"But while I merely read and ask questions you work," she said.

Alan raised his shoulders slightly.

"Not much," he replied.

She looked inquisitive.

"I thought you were in the very heart of the movement."

"One part of it. I am a member of one committee—that is all."

"But it is an important committee?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"What do you do? What is your programme?"

"We talk and—we hope to do more."

He looked mysterious.

"You are a conspirator—you confessed that before."

"Did I?"

"Yes. Can—can I help you?"

He was certainly pleased. A man who could win such sympathy from so pretty a woman should certainly account himself lucky.

"Not this time, I think."

"What are you doing, Alan?" she asked, as if a refusal to answer would wound her. She showed an anxiety and struck a pleading note.

He hesitated. She seemed a most enthusiastic supporter of the cause. She had given money—

"I—I—we are going to strike a glorious blow for liberty."

"Not a bomb or anything of that kind, is it?" She spoke hurriedly, real anxiety moved her. She was a woman unenthusiastic, and so bombs and "anything of that kind" made her shiver. He was affected by her manner, of course.

"No, no. That's the beauty of it."

"I am so glad. You might have got hurt."

"I am afraid we can't always be thinking of our own skins," he said.

"No, of course not. There must be some risk. Still"—she looked, probably what she felt—"I am glad all the same."

"It is a glorious scheme," he said, thinking of it and dwelling with some pleasure on the great victory to be achieved by the bloodless stroke.

"Tell me all about it," she said winningly.

"All?" He shook his head. "There are others in it too."

"Well, I am one of you now."

"Still, the less one talks of these things the better. A casual word dropped—"

"But here—"

"Spies at the Carlton—it is quite possible."

"I must know, Alan. You have whetted my curiosity, and a woman's curiosity is the most remorseless thing on this earth—allowing, of course, for exaggeration."

Alan laughed.

"Teach your curiosity a lesson," he said. "Tie it up—chain it. Scoff at it even and tell it that on this occasion it is not to be fed with biscuits from other stores."

"You are laughing at me."

He protested.

"It isn't my curiosity, Alan. I mentioned that because men always lay that to our charge. My curiosity is nothing. But I feel I must know what is going on particularly— Well, what *rôle* shall you play?"

He hesitated.

"It is important, of course."

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"Persistency is to win, is it?"

"Tell me just as much or as little as you like, only give me some crumbs to chew. I want to feed on some knowledge. I am glad you are not to handle bombs, because, oh, well, they are such clumsy things; but then you must do something. What is it?" She seemed to have the fervour of the proselyte plus a personal note, which was striking.

After a brief hesitation, Alan said—

"I've got to ride in a motor-car, that's all."

"A ride in a motor," repeated the countess. "Are you helping someone to escape?" she asked eagerly.

Alan shook his head.

"No. We ride for victory."

"Ride for victory?" The countess puckered her brows. "You run no risk?"

"Except that we shall probably exceed the speed limit."

"In Russia?"

"Yes."

"St Petersburg?"

Alan nodded and then raised a warning finger.

"When do you go?" she asked.

"I am waiting the signal. And then we shall dictate to the Tsar: he will be forced to concede —he will give way."

Alan almost forgot himself in his enthusiasm. He was captive to his imagination—striking his blow for liberty.

"The signal," she said in a low voice, looking anxious. "You are not hiding anything—you really run no risk?"

"None of sudden death, at any rate; and if we win, the victory will be glorious."

"But you will take care," she said in a voice, low, seductive and dangerous. "Let me know when you get the signal."

"Who would have thought to see you so enthusiastic in so short a time? Yes, I will let you know—though I expect I shall leave in a hurry."

"I wish it was over," she said in a way to please him.

Alan enjoyed himself. He confessed frankly that

the Countess Brinski was an exceedingly attractive woman. He found himself conjuring up a vision of her when he was back in his chambers. His thoughts were somewhat vague and indistinct, but they seemed to run, if one could have evolved a clear outline: "When I get back from Russia I'll—" Then they drifted into the vague and shadowy. But there was a distinct something there.

The countess was more madly desirous than ever. She wondered if she had conquered any impression that Irene had made the day before. But Irene might be removed from the path. The countess sent an invitation to Stephan Drumitz to call on her at 11.30 the next morning. Her associate must be spurred on to do all he could towards the fulfilment of his part of the bargain.

CHAPTER XII

"Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."
—BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

STEPHAN DRUMITZ called at the Carlton in response to the countess's note. He was to all appearance a man of fashion, wearing his clothes with an air of nicety and seemingly fastidious in the choice of them. He was a conventional man of breeding, a Briton to all outward seeming. At heart he was Stephan Drumitz.

The man was punctual and the woman was waiting, which was an indication at least that both were actuated by eagerness.

They greeted each other with little embarrassment, for a social education inculcates a brave show under all circumstances, and no one hangs his head except the acknowledged felon, and he not always.

"I got your note and was glad," said Drumitz.

"It is perhaps nothing," said the countess, "but I thought I would like you to know."

"Even details serve. It is difficult to explain my position, countess, but think of one dear to me murdered and I—" He shrugged his shoulders expressively— "Well, I cannot give up the cause for which I have laboured so long." He nodded as

though he would have her understand without much explanation.

She was sympathetic and showed it by her look.

"I may be a conspirator myself soon," she said, with a smile.

"You couldn't do better."

He wished she would tell him the news but was too astute to press her.

"There is something being done," she said.

"Hatched in London?"

"Yes, and in Berlin, and in St Petersburg."

He was obviously interested and seemed as if he would understand what it was all about by cogitating on that fact alone.

"Here, Berlin and St Petersburg," he murmured. "Then it is something on a big scale."

"I can't say. I don't know the details."

"But you know more?"

"It is to be a glorious blow for liberty—that I know."

"Ah!" Stephan Drumitz was obviously impressed.

But he was really more, for he was exceedingly curious. If a big blow were to be struck for liberty in Russia and the committees in London, Berlin and St Petersburg were working in unison, the plan was one well worth watching.

"A blow for liberty," he repeated, as if the phrase gave him pleasure, though a very sharp woman not so wholly thinking of herself as was Countess Brinski, would have noted a nuance of insincerity in

the tone. "Who is going to strike the blow?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I should like to know," he said. "Perhaps old comrades of mine." He looked past the countess as if thinking of old associations.

"It isn't assassination," she said.

He did not reply at once.

"A big blow for liberty—not assassination!—What then?"

"I don't even know that."

"You didn't get very much information, countess."

She hoped he would not be disappointed, for his assistance was very precious to her.

"I only know this: there is to be a big blow struck, but there are no bombs or murder mixed up in it, and yet—well, it is to be a blow for freedom."

He was puzzled.

"Abduction of the Tsar," he muttered to himself, as if that might be the enterprise. But he shook his head. "Impossible!"

"There is a motor-car to be requisitioned."

"Someone going to escape?" he said quickly, and then at once he added: "No. That isn't a blow for liberty." He sat for a moment without speaking, obviously thinking over what the countess had told him. The information was certainly important if tantalising. It was the phrase "big blow for liberty" that impressed him most, for that would not be used in reference to a small affair, and the fact that there was no assassination connected with the affair gave it a turn

of mystery that added to its importance in the eyes of Drumitz. He wanted to think but he did not like too long a silence; it might make the countess think too.

"What comrades are helping?"

She hesitated.

"I am doing quite right in telling you all this?" she asked, for, after all, she was going to mention the name of the man she loved.

"More than right: you are doing wisely," he said. "I may help them."

"Mr Leigh goes in the motor-car," she said.

He was clearly gratified at the news. He felt he was even betraying his satisfaction too freely, for he spoke quickly.

"Good, good. He is safe and daring. Alan Leigh! I had not given him credit for such—devotion."

"Do you think it will be safe for him?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"He knows best. There is always a risk—" He stopped and the next moment exclaimed with great satisfaction: "Got it! I'll have them!"

"What is it?" asked the countess, eagerly, a little disturbed by her companion's expression.

"Nothing, nothing," he said, feeling he had behaved indiscreetly. "I was thinking of something else."

Somehow she knew he lied, and was a little afraid.

"What did you mean?" she asked with uneasiness and pleading in her voice.

"Nothing, nothing," he said, wishing to reassure her. "It was of no importance—at least to you. I will be frank, countess. I want to find my cousin's

murderer, and I feel I shall get on the track of him if I can keep in touch with the revolutionaries. He may want to commit more murders. I'll stop him if I can. And let me tell you this. My cousin Irene will not marry Mr Leigh. I can stop her. I hold information that gives me power over her. I don't mind admitting that to you, and if you will help me as we have arranged I will use my power to keep Mr Leigh and Irene apart."

The countess was satisfied with his reference to his power over Irene. She felt she had now an ally worth propitiating. She did not wish to be too effusive in her gratitude, though she could have thanked Stephan Drumitz with extravagance.

"I'll help you," she muttered, her eyes betraying their joyousness.

"Then tell me—when does he start?"

"Any day—any moment even, I believe."

"Where does he motor from?"

"Berlin."

"He goes from here to Berlin by train and then picks up the motor?"

"Yes."

"Who goes with him?"

"I don't know."

This catechism was conducted by a man keen, alert and masterful. He stopped, looked at her, then past her. He nodded as if he were satisfied.

"I think," he said, "what you have told me may help. One never knows, still—" He left the phrase unfinished.

"And Irene will not marry Mr Leigh?" she asked: there was her anxiety.

"I think not. I believe I have the whip-hand in that quarter and I would rather you married Mr Leigh, if you wish, countess, because I don't mind confessing, I should rather like to marry Irene myself."

She was not greatly surprised for she had already imagined that a likely desire on his part. Poor Irene! This Stephan Drumitz looked like a man who could be a troublesome mortal if he chose.

Before he went, he said—

"Get to know, if you can, when Mr Leigh goes and let me know at once."

"Shall I write?"

He shook his head and was silent for a moment.

"No. One never knows with the letter. Things go astray. Call—you can call on Irene."

"Suppose you are out?"

He hesitated. That was certainly a point worth consideration.

"In that case," he said, "wire. Say 'goods leave,' and fill in the day, also the train if possible. But avoid writing or wiring if possible."

When Drumitz parted from the countess he went away with the air of a man who sees success. Pursuit was to be rewarded, striving to be crowned.

He called on M. Vipoff of the Secret Service, with the result that the Albany was at once put under surveillance so that Alan's departure might be at once

noted. Stephan Drumitz also prepared a bag for himself and looked out the trains to St Petersburg.

The countess was quite satisfied with the interview. Stephan Drumitz was not displeased with his bargain and he was a superb ally, for he wished to marry Irene himself. The countess was certainly excited at that news. There could be no more effective way of stopping a match between Alan and Irene. Even if the man would become engaged to her the countess would be satisfied. She began to think very hopefully of the future. This Stephan Drumitz was certainly an odd kind of creature, but he was proving himself a real friend? What had he said?—He held the whip-hand over Irene. What an awful thing to say! The man seemed like a tyrant forced to behave decently because he lived among decent people. "The whip-hand." And he wanted to marry Irene! The countess felt inclined to sympathise with Irene, but she could scarcely afford much sympathy to a rival. "The whip-hand!" She almost smiled. Stephan's strength and plan suited her so admirably.

"I wonder what has given him the whip-hand," she said to herself, allured by the seductive possibilities. She gave up guessing. "Let's hope he'll marry her soon," she comforted herself.

The next day at noon, a messenger boy arrived at the Carlton with a note for the Countess Brinski. It was from Alan.

"The signal has arrived. I leave in an hour. *A bientôt.*"

The countess was moved. The letter from Alan

with its brief but pregnant message thrilled her woman's sensitiveness. "*A bientôt!*"—the phrase was sweet. Did he mean it to be so? She hoped he would take great care of himself and then give up for ever these foolish politics. "*A bientôt!*" Decidedly the phrase was one to linger with a pleasant sound.

Then she thought of Stephan Drumitz. She must let him know, and as she thought of him so soon after Alan, she experienced a feeling akin to fear. A kind of instinct fretted her. Surely the Russian meant no harm to Alan!

She sat still for a moment, hardly daring to move, so acute was this feeling of danger to Alan. But the mood passed. She reassured herself, saying her fancies were foolish, due to her anxiety for Alan's safe return. She understood Stephan Drumitz's desire—besides, was he not a revolutionary too? And had he not said he might even be able to help?

After lunch she went to Hampstead to call on Irene and let Stephan know of Alan's departure.

Irene had the look of a woman in trouble, as though some dismal thing held her fast to a bond of unhappiness. She did her best to be pleasant and agreeable, but no effort could overcome the impression of a sad woman that she conveyed. The countess noticed it quickly and thought of the "whip-hand."

As they sat in the drawing-room where the countess had made her first compact with Stephan, they gossiped of indifferent matters, and then the countess, too curious to be silent on the subject, said—

"Do you see Alan Leigh often?"

"Not often," replied Irene, looking away from her visitor.

The reply pleased the countess who could not refrain from adding—

"I thought he came frequently."

"He was very good at the time—of the inquest; but—is he well?"

"Quite. I have been seeing a good deal of him, but I am afraid I shall not see him for some days at least." She was making her friendship out to be a matter to strike Irene. "He has gone to Russia."

"Russia." Irene spoke the word with no show of feeling, but the next moment she started, her eyes were wider and she looked at the countess eagerly. "Russia?" she asked.

"Yes." The countess gave a little laugh. She had an idea Irene was jealous and was trying to hide her defeat as well as she could. The "whip-hand" still tickled the countess. "Why do you look so startled?" she said.

Irene tried to revert to her unmoved state.

"Nothing." But the look of anxiety after the word betrayed her.

"There must be something—or you wouldn't look like that."

"Do I look strange?" Irene tried to pull herself together.

"Yes." The countess was watching her closely.

"Tell me—do you know if Alan has gone on—political business?"

The countess hesitated. This was not information to be given lightly.

"Why do you ask?"

"For—for his sake," replied Irene, caring little if she betrayed herself.

The countess was infected with Irene's mood. Fear is contagious. The two women loved the one man and because Irene had no thought of marrying him they were better able to think of his welfare.

"His sake—Alan's?" said the countess. "But why do you talk like that? Surely he runs no danger in going to Russia?"

"Everybody runs a danger who goes to Russia on —certain business."

The countess felt she had always known this, but that somehow this was the first time she had realised the fact.

"Of course." She hesitated to supply the information.

"You won't tell me?" said Irene. "Of course I have no right to ask."

"Perhaps I have no right to tell."

Irene looked anxious.

"I should like to know," she said.

"You should ask your cousin," said the countess.

"My cousin—Stephan?"

"Yes."

"Why do you say that?" Irene's eyes were bright with great excitement.

"Perhaps he knows."

Irene gave a little cry and stood up. She looked

through the window as if she would fain do something and then a look of despair flitted over her face. She turned to the countess—

"Does Stephan know?"

The manner was too intense, the tone too feeling to let the countess be unmoved. She realised there was something she did not understand, and yet even now she had a fear of betraying herself to Irene and letting her learn of her close acquaintanceship with Stephan.

"Why do you ask?" She still boggled.

Irene shook her head a little wearily as if she would deal with nothing trivial or petty at this time.

"Tell me," she said. "It is in Alan's interest."

"You frighten me," said the countess. "Does it matter if Stephan knows?"

"Perhaps."

"Why?"

Irene could not tell. And so the two women felt that the man they loved was running his great risk while they fenced to keep their secrets from each other.

"I cannot tell you," said Irene. "But I will tell you this: if Alan has gone to Russia on illegal business—you know what I mean?"

"Politics?"

"Yes. He is, I fear, running a great danger if —Stephan knows."

The countess was roused now. Her colour had gone and fear was gripping her.

"Danger?" she said. "Yes, Stephan does know."

Irene paled, looked vacantly in front of her as

though she met trouble again and knew its bitterness, and then sank in a seat without uttering a word.

The countess went to her quickly.

"I must know what you mean," she said. "Why is there danger if Stephan knows?"

"Isn't it enough that there is danger?"

"What can we do?" The countess felt Irene's honesty like a child feels affection: there was no doubting it. She knelt by Irene and looked at her almost pleadingly.

"Do you know anything about his plan?" Irene asked very quietly.

"He has gone to Berlin and then he takes a motor to St Petersburg, but what he does there I don't know."

"Part of a plot?"

"Yes."

Irene wrung her hands quietly and then said—

"He must be warned, he must be warned."

"Will Stephan betray him?" said the countess, dashing at the light.

"Who knows?"

"What have I done!" called out the unhappy woman.

"You done?" said Irene, and she seemed to understand.

The countess was silent, troubled about many things.

"Have you betrayed him to Stephan?" asked Irene, in whose voice one might have caught a note of accusation heightened by affection's fear.

"Betrayed! No. Oh, don't think that! I had no idea! Betrayed!—Surely you don't mean that Stephan would—harm Alan?"

Irene understood what had happened without thinking for the moment of what had driven the countess on her course. Stephan knew that Alan had gone to Russia on "illegal" business and it was the countess who had told him. She sat silent, dumb with the possibilities.

The countess, feeling guilty, hardly dared to speak. She feared an outburst of accusation from Irene and prepared to weep. But as nothing was said and the silence became oppressive she looked up. She was herself greatly troubled by Irene's words and attitude —and touched Irene's hand.

"Where is your cousin? Send for him: perhaps he can warn Alan."

Irene shook her head.

"Stephan went to Russia yesterday," she said.

The countess received the news quietly, not understanding its significance. But Irene's troubled face made her see the weightiness of the information and she repeated it to herself as if to grasp it thoroughly: "Stephan went to Russia yesterday." If Stephan meant to betray— Then she saw it and went very pale. She looked at Irene pleadingly.

"Not to betray Alan?" she asked almost piteously.

Irene made a tiny movement with her hands and continued looking away from the countess as though she were watching the coming of a catastrophe.

The countess tried to read Irene's thoughts. Irene

was pure anxiety. The countess wondered if she herself would be betrayed, if Alan would be told that she had informed—most inadvertently, of course—but still— Who would have guessed that Stephan would betray? Yet he had an uncanny look. And Alan was perhaps going to his doom through that awful creature's treachery. The countess shuddered and clasped her hands and hoped she had not said too much to Irene. Alan going to be caught!—The countess looked at Irene pleadingly.

"What can we do?" she said.

"Alan must be warned."

"Yes, yes, how?—Telegraph—"

"Where to?"

"Berlin."

"The address?"

The countess looked very frightened.

"We have no address. What shall we do?" She betrayed her own feelings almost wilfully now.

"He goes to Berlin by train, and then by motor to St Petersburg?"

"Yes."

"He can only be warned when he is in Russia," said Irene, speaking with a calamity in her note.

"Who can warn him?"

"You," said Irene.

"I?" The countess started.

Irene nodded.

"There is no one else."

The countess stood up and looked frightened, "How?" she whispered.

"You will have to go to St Petersburg—he may stay at the Hôtel de l'Europe. If not—"

"I can't, I can't," cried the countess. "What should I say to him? He would know I—"

Irene was pressing her hands tightly together.

"But Alan's safety depends on him being warned."

The countess was very frightened.

"To Russia?" she murmured. "Why, I might be caught too. It would mean Siberia—"

"It may mean Siberia for Alan."

"I—I daren't. Can't somebody else go? Is there nobody who can warn him?" The countess was very anxious after her fashion.

Irene was silent, thinking of possibilities and probabilities, hopes and fears, dreams and realities.

"I will go," she said very quietly.

For a moment the countess had a fear of another kind. She did not look overpleased. Perplexity was on her face. She felt the attitude was unwise and galloped to excess. Irene noted the false note, but was unmoved.

"When will you leave?"

"At once," said Irene.

"And when you meet him," said the countess, "he—he will ask you how you knew he was in danger."

"I will say I discovered it."

"He may ask how."

"I shall not tell him."

The countess was amazed. This was beyond her imagining.

"You will not mention my name?"

"If you prefer I shouldn't."

The countess hesitated.

"I had no idea — you understand that. And I—would do anything to save him. You understand?"

"I think so," said Irene, quietly.

"I used to be jealous of you."

Irene shook her head and a sad look crept into her eyes.

"That was unnecessary."

The countess rejoiced greatly, but repressed her feelings well. She kissed Irene, feeling she at least owed her some measure of emotion.

"You will save him and—not tell that I said anything? It was all a mistake. I thought it was no harm—in fact, I understood Alan might be helped. You are a dear." She kissed her again.

"I had better get ready," said Irene, quietly.

"Let me help you. And do you know I thought at one time you might marry Alan."

Irene tried to be calm and unmoved, and maybe she succeeded, though a rival's eyes are notoriously sharp.

"That," said Irene, "will not happen;" and seemingly without emotion she rang the bell for her maid.

CHAPTER XIII

"A traveller between life and death."—WORDSWORTH.

IRENE had made the journey from London to St Petersburg more than once, so her arrangements—save the obtaining of the passport—were of insignificant trouble. Her maid packed her a few clothes in a bag, and in the shortest possible time Irene was at the station, waiting for the Dover train to start.

It was only when she was actually on her way that she had time to think over what had happened.

Her sensations were in a whirl. Slowly the central truth stood out nakedly: Alan was engaged in some illegal business which took him to St Petersburg, and Stephan, having discovered it, had gone too. There lay the fear.

She had aged markedly since she had left St Petersburg. Care had put its stamp on her, and the shadow of disappointment, of the unrealised dream of happiness, the actual touch with the pain of life was there for the acute observer to see. Her beautiful soft brown eyes and the wavy hair were still a wondrous attraction, and her bearing was always that of one who thinks of others, and was consequently sweet

and full of charm. She sighed far more than had been her custom, and her laugh was getting to be a rare thing. And that is tragedy.

Dover! Irene got out of the train and made her way to the Ostend boat, taking little notice of porters and Flemish sailors and excited travellers who were crossing to the Continent for the first time. She secured a deck chair in the bow of the boat, wrapped her rug round her, and looked straight in front. It is a good attitude, and in this case it was eminently characteristic.

The boat soon was free from her moorings, and Irene felt peculiarly responsive to the astatic sea. The lights from the harbour, the Calais light, the Foreland light, just attracted her as fitful beckonings from a darkened world. England was soon left well behind, the boat's engine throbbed at its labour, the stars were out in all their glory, the salted wind made the night air glorious in its freshness, and Irene looked steadily forward, thinking. Alan and Stephan! Alan and Stephan!

Why was she placed between two such men with no fair chance? Alan loved her and she— She feared to let herself be outspoken. But in the night, while the earth seemed sleeping, and only the clouds and the train appeared to move, she had a desire to be honest with herself. It was a luxury she had scarcely dared to snatch. She had fought it, knowing its futility. Why seize the ecstasy when the reaction will be all the more galling? But the present hour is always the most glorious. The future is the least

certain and so is oftenest ignored. The past may claim the cynic's laughter, the wastrel's curses and the upright man's content, but the present hour must ever win for it is always building the beautiful or the ugly.

Irene flung off the fetters. She loved Alan. She crouched almost in the corner of the carriage as if to hide. The view from the carriage window, the movement of the train, the presence of her fellow-travellers ceased to hold her attention. She loved Alan. She thought of his appearance, his eyes, his face, even such trifles as the pattern of some of his ties she had noticed and remembered. She recalled little tricks he had—the chuckling laugh with his lips tightly shut, the way he would play with his watch-chain, wrapping it round his finger, his way of leaning his head a little to one side when he listened intently. His voice too, and his manner of speaking . . .

She clasped her hands together and was very still, as if afraid to make joy flee away with a movement.

Her anguish followed, as was inevitable.

He was not for her. The night seemed blacker, the earth more still—all was cold. Alan was warmth and light and life in her eyes, but he was not for her.

Happily, with the motion of the train, the fatigue of the journey, and the wearing nature of her thoughts, Irene fell asleep.

When she wakened it was time for *déjeuner*, and then she felt less lonely.

Breakfast over, Irene went back to her seat and watched with an unobservant eye the things that fell across her ken. She was travelling mechanically, and feeling a little dulled. When they had passed Aix-la-Chapelle, and the luggage had been examined, Irene began to feel the effects of the journey, and that made her almost irritable whenever there was an unnecessary stop. She wondered why they stopped, feeling somebody was stupid.

As she saw the smart-looking buildings of the most modern of capitals, she could not refrain from looking eagerly, even though she realised it was vainly, for a sight of Alan.

Berlin! It was here Alan had left the train to take the motor. She glanced at every motor and had brief starts of hope as a figure like Alan's swept into view and out of it.

A fresh and different type of traveller got on the train now. There were Poles going home, an Englishman or two, German commercial travellers and others, and Russians of various classes. The German tongue was dominant: the athletic Englishman and the slender Englishwoman were superseded by the heavy German and his heavy wife.

Irene slept fitfully during the night, and began to be anxious as she felt Berlin being left behind, and the frontier of that enigmatic land full of possibilities of all kinds came nearer and nearer.

England, Belgium, Germany—in all these countries through which Irene had passed, men were not afraid to think or to speak, but she was approaching

a country where men are made gamblers, for they have rushed to the card-table so that they might keep silent, for their thoughts were dangerous, and words would have spelt ruin.

A silence hung about the train just as Wierzbolov was about to be reached. Phrases were guarded—who knows but that amongst those travellers some were going on a mission to deal death to some Russian official?

The usual stop was made at Wierzbolov for the examination of luggage and passports. Irene's was in order and she carried so little baggage that she was almost an object of suspicion.

There was no escaping from the difference between Russia and the other countries through which she had passed. In them she had entered carelessly and without trouble. Her baggage certainly had been examined by the customs officials but she herself had been free to wander without scrutiny and without hindrance. At the very threshold of this great empire the German governess, the English foreman going to the cotton mill in St Petersburg, the Poles going home, the Russians returning to their native land, all—from the baby in arms to the old man—were regarded with suspicion. Who are you? Where are you going? Where do you come from?

Here, too, the train was changed, for the Russian authorities have no wish to let German trains run on their lines and so have a different gauge. The journey was continued through Poland, entering Russia proper at Kovno where there were woods and mountains in

plenty to catch the eye. At Vilna there was a stop of half an hour for refreshment and then the route was pursued through a vast land that waits a fine government.

Irene was very tired or she would have felt that the train did not move half quickly enough. The long journey had, however, its effect on her and made her almost faint. Her observation was too dull at the last to realise whether she stopped or moved. Just an idea haunted her: Alan was to be saved! Alan was to be saved!

She had often on the journey tried to think what she would do when she got to St Petersburg, but she could think of no better plan than going to a Madame Pochevski who was in sympathy with the revolutionaries and known to Alan. It was vague, but better the vague than nothing.

Gatchina. Tsarskoe Selo!

Irene felt proximity's thrill. Here she was at last. She was weary physically, her head had been aching with the journey and rest was the thing she needed, but she could not escape the excitement of her arrival in St Petersburg. Here was Alan, here too was Stephan, here was she—what was to happen in the next few days? Would Alan be caught? Or would he do the work he came to do? Would she be able to warn him? What would Stephan do?

Irene felt the great wheels of chance were moving slowly and blindly, and love and liberty, life and death were depending on the chance turns of the wheel.

So much at stake, so small a chance!

Irene looked through the window, but the night was now too far advanced even for a glimpse of the Admiralty spire and then the train steamed into the Warsaw Railway terminus at St Petersburg.

CHAPTER XIV

"Know how sublime a thing it is
To suffer and be strong."—LONGFELLOW.

IRENE went to a quiet hotel near the station for she wished to keep her visit to St Petersburg hidden from Stephan if possible. Happily she slept well and was up early.

The old associations of the place gave her a feeling of friendliness. The language, the manners and customs, the buildings and streets, the ubiquitous official uniform struck a familiar chord. She did not feel so lonely in this city of over a million souls looking for a man whose address she did not know, as she had done when coming off the Ostend boat cheek by jowl with her fellow-travellers. Man's indifference is a chilling thing.

This kindred feeling was her first impression: it soon passed. She was quickly absorbed in her task and her glances were keen and searching. She could not repress her excitement every time a motor-car came into view. She went first towards the Nevsky Prospect on the mere chance of catching a sight of Alan. She intended to call at the Hotel de l'Europe and also on Madame Pochevski.

The great city of Peter the Great possesses fine wide thoroughfares which were but sparsely peopled in the

outlying quarters. Irene made her way over the Fontanka Canal, past the Anitchkoff Palace into the Nevsky Prospect. Here there was movement in plenty. The shops on the north side attracted their usual crowd. The extent of the illiterateness of the Russian people was betrayed by the decorative paintings outside, where the goods sold were graphically portrayed and not described in a writing which is understood only by a few.

The bizarre architecture of the wonderful churches struck Irene forcibly after her stay in London, and the sight of people uttering their prayers in the public streets to the diversion of traffic was a testimony to the influence of religion on the Russian people and to the western habit!

Irene had wandered up and down the Nevsky Prospect pretending to be interested in the shops but watching keenly every man of Alan's height and every motor that passed, when from behind a row of droshkies she saw Stephan. Her heart gave a leap and at the first sight of him she felt unable to move. Here was the man she did not want to meet. The man she sought was not to be seen. The world's way.

Irene turned round quickly and hid discreetly behind other people, at the same time trying to keep a sharp watch on Stephan. He seemed to be looking towards her and for a moment she thought she had been observed. But fortunately Stephan and his companion crossed the street and passed on.

Irene felt relieved and wished she might not come across his path again, within the next day or so at any rate. Then an idea came to her and she watched Stephan's movements and followed him slowly. Suppose he knew where Alan was! Irene experienced a sensation of fear. Suppose Stephan was really going to betray Alan!—and he was on his way now!

The thought made Irene determined but fearful. She felt she had no option but to follow.

The two men went on speaking eagerly to the accompaniment of extravagant gesture. As they went out of Nevsky Prospect Stephan turned round and again Irene was afraid she had been discovered. She stood still, her heart beating wildly. This kind of game was one in which she was inexperienced. Stephan had tricks of his own. He had not observed Irene and passed quickly out of St Petersburg's principal thoroughfare.

Irene felt nervous now. The second shock had disturbed her greatly. Moreover, the moment she turned out of Nevsky Prospect she entered into wide streets with comparatively little traffic and few people. She did not wish by her attitude to attract the attention of any of the numerous spies who swarm in St Petersburg on occasions and are not even known to the ordinary *gardavoy*.

But she could not turn back: the chance seemed too great, although a sensation of some shame came to her. She felt she was playing the spy herself. Suppose Stephan were not interested in Alan's

doings at all?— And she was watching him like a mouchard.

But Alan! She could not forget that danger might threaten him. She could not afford to leave Alan to the tender mercies of Stephan—she could give no doubt. She went on quickly and turned the corner — only to draw back in fear and trembling. Stephan and his companion had halted not fifty yards down the street and were looking at a building on the opposite side of the road.

Irene dare not stop lest Stephan should turn to see who had appeared and disappeared so quickly. She walked very quickly to the nearest droshky and got in even without first bargaining—a disastrous affair in St Petersburg even though there is a legal tariff. She was glad to drive away even expensively and she scarcely dared to look back lest she should betray her presence to Stephan.

She knew his possibilities and trembled. What was he pointing out that place for to the other man? Was Alan staying there? Irene began to realise there is a physical as well as a mental side to the pursuit of a man. The journey had been tiring: this was trying her to the utmost. She felt the need of calm and felt too its impossibility. Alan was perhaps being betrayed!

She wasted an hour before returning, and then crept along the Nevsky Prospect again to pursue the trail of Stephan which was too ominous to be overlooked. He had disappeared, so Irene walked down

the street and saw the Hotel d'Angleterre. It was at that the two men had been staring.

She hesitated a moment, feeling the position delicate. Then boldly she went across and asked the hall-porter if Mr Leigh, an Englishman, was staying there. The man shook his head.

"No, Madame." And she felt she was being scrutinised.

She was more than disappointed: the position was awkward. The man seemed on the point of saying something and Irene was preparing to go to avoid his catechism, when Alan entered the hall from the hotel.

Irene nearly betrayed herself. Her joy was exuberant, the surprise great. These emotions were confessed while Alan's astonishment was easy to notice. The hall-porter was observant as the tribe usually is in St Petersburg.

"This is a pleasure as unexpected as it is real," said Alan, holding out his hand.

Irene had never seemed so lavish of a glad satisfaction with Alan since he had proposed to her.

"Yes," she said and collected her wits quickly. What name was Alan using? "I have just been asking"—she spoke now in Russian so that the porter might hear—"if Mr Leigh was staying here."

"I don't think so," said Alan.

As they turned away the porter watched them closely.

"Did you know I was here?" he asked, when they were in the reading-room.

She looked round anxiously.

"Are we safe here?"

"From what point of view?"

"I want to tell you something important."

Alan looked round.

"It might be better to talk of friends in England," he said. "Let me take you a ride in my motor; we shall be safe from eavesdroppers there and I have an excursion to make."

In a little time Alan had got out his 80 horse-power motor, a glaring white in colour, and he and Irene and the chauffeur were on the road that led to Moscow.

Irene! It was always a name to send a thrill through Alan. Why had she come now? He looked at her and his eyes caught hers. She too felt comfortable.

"Too noisy to talk," he shouted; "we shall stop soon."

She nodded and was not sorry for the silence. It seemed comfortable riding beside a man without the necessity for conversation: it presupposed friendship. If only her journey by Alan's side might have been longer—but such thoughts were not for her. He was in danger. She had found him. It seemed at that moment a rapturous thing. She had found him in time. She could afford to be silent for a little while.

They stopped about twenty-five miles after passing the cattle market by the Warsaw Station.

Alan handed Irene down from the car.

"I hope you have enjoyed the ride," he said.

"Very much."

"We can talk here."

"Yes. It is urgent."

He looked at her a moment. She glanced round and then whispered—

"I want to warn you."

It was an ominous sentence. Alan received it with some foreboding. Warnings in Russia are often the preludes of serious matters.

They had reached a small village with its mean casual houses built of wood, many half underground, and made their way to one a little better than the others, standing apart. Alan caught sight of a signal in the window and was content. The chauffeur—a comrade utilised to give a greater air of verisimilitude to Alan's touring *rôle*—waited by the car ready to warn in case of danger, while Alan and Irene walked together towards the house.

"For what purpose do you think I am in Russia?" asked Alan.

"One that is attended with danger."

"How do you know? But we must talk indoors."

Alan gave the signal on the house and the door was opened by Olga Krakoff, who was surprised to see Alan accompanied by a lady.

"A friend," said Alan, and Olga Krakoff shook hands with Irene warmly.

When they were inside and the door was shut there was a little constraint. Alan and Olga were

conspirators ready to discuss the latest details of their plan ; Irene was not of them.

"Would you rather speak to me alone?" asked Alan, "or does it matter if—this lady is present?"

He boggled at the name, feeling the mention of it unwise from Olga's point of view.

Irene had a truthful face; her innate honesty gave her that blessing and Olga had little distrust.

"I don't mind—if you don't," said Irene.

"We are in the same galley," returned Alan.

"Then I only came to warn you."

"Came to warn us! Where did you come from?"

"Hampstead."

"Where is that?" asked Olga.

"London."

The two conspirators were astonished. Olga for one reason, Alan for an additional one.

"Have you come expressly from London to warn us?"

"Yes."

"What of?"

"The danger you run."

It was vague and yet definite enough. Olga and Alan looked at each other.

"Do you mean our plot has been discovered?' asked Olga.

"I can't say. I don't know. I am unacquainted with details and I would rather keep ignorant of them. I imagined your plot had been discovered and I merely came to warn—Alan."

The warning came at a critical moment and Olga and Alan were impressed and yet undecided. There was a momentary pause as they all seemed to be trying to realise the position.

"You only imagined it had been discovered?" said Olga.

"I am practically certain."

Discovered! Toiling and toiling through the dark to find the earth falls in when light promises. Sowing and no reaping, digging and no recompense!

What plots have been hatched to bring forth but disaster to the plotters!

Irene read the thoughts that flitted between Alan and Olga. Discovered! The word was awful to these people.

Alan seemed to be quieter than the woman. Olga snatched at all straws.

"You are sure it was *our* plot?" she asked.

"It was because—Alan was suspected."

It was early in the morning in this Russian village, yet the inky night might have fallen on the two revolutionaries without a comment. They seemed to be struggling spasmodically against inflexible fetters.

"Who suspected me?" asked Alan.

Irene shook her head.

"I can only tell you," she said, "that you were suspected—of being concerned in a plot. I don't think it was known exactly what, but you have been watched, for I saw—two men outside your hotel this morning."

"And yet you came," said Alan, in a quiet voice.

"That was good," echoed Olga, and there are women in Russia who know not only how to give good gifts to their friends but to risk their lives and even give them for those they do not even know by name.

"I had to come," said Irene, simply.

Alan looked at her curiously. He was thrilled and felt woman an enigma. Irene felt his eyes on her and knew he was reading her heart; but she did not mind. She was happy. The dreariness of the journey was ended: she had found him.

"Two men outside your hotel," said Olga to Alan, repeating Irene's phrase. She, of course, had no undercurrents of feelings sending their wash into her soul.

"Yes," said Irene, wishing to make them realise the danger.

"If we could only be sure," said Alan.

"But you can be careful."

Alan and Olga looked at each other and Irene had a breath of jealousy. Community of aim sealed by community of danger is a delectable bond. Irene feared lest these two rare hearts might dare too much and she was not relieved when Olga said—

"One can be too careful."

"And too venturesome," added Irene. She was beginning to wonder if she would have to fight with this woman for the possession of Alan, as the Greeks and Trojans fought for the body of Patroclus. She saw Alan and Olga looking at each other and divined the man's sense of duty was holding him.

"It is folly to attempt the impossible," she said, and there was no misreading her feeling.

"But is it impossible?" asked Olga, quietly.

"That is the question: what do they know?" said Alan. "If I am watched—" He shrugged his shoulders as though weighing that fact. "After all, they may know nothing and we may give them the slip."

"Exactly," said Olga. "Besides, we can't leave the others in the lurch. We must be at our posts."

Irene was beginning to look with tired eyes. They seemed to have sought satisfaction so long that further disappointment was intolerable.

"I am sure you will be caught," she said anxiously. "If you have been suspected and watched, probably the rest is guessed. I know nothing of course—but escape while you have a chance. Give the others warning. You can always try again if you want, but not now. You will do no good and I feel sure you are in danger."

It was not a glib situation and after someone had spoken, words did not come too speedily.

"How did you find out?" asked Olga.

Irene hesitated.

"It was a pure accident, and it really doesn't matter. But I feel your danger is great." She put her hand on Alan's arm. "Go—persuade her."

Alan took Irene's hand.

"Thanks are feeble. Only you perhaps can know what I feel. I am still amazed, Irene, that you have found it worth while to come all the way from London to warn me—that was it?"

She acquiesced with an inclination. She felt he need not be amazed.

He looked at her lovingly, too moved to say more. And she had rejected him! What did it mean? He turned to Olga.

"We must, of course, warn the others if possible." Then to Irene: "What are you going to do?—stay here or go back to London?"

"Go back."

He seemed pleased.

"At once?"

"Yes."

"I am glad."

"You will come too—leave here at once?" She looked at Olga. "You are both in danger, I am certain. Hide—wait a little."

"We are suspected—that is bad enough, of course," said Olga, "but it might be worse. And we may give them the slip. They may overlook us: they may be ignorant of our plot."

"They may know. Don't take the risk. Capture will be horrible. Save yourselves—"

Alan interrupted her.

"As you thought of us, we must think of others."

Irene stared wildly, despairingly, and sat down, feeling full of anguish. She had fought and found devotion and a sense of honour too much for her.

"We shall not behave foolishly and we have good means of escape," said Alan, hopefully, and added that under the circumstances she had better return to St Petersburg by train; and for her comfort he

promised to take every precaution he could, and act as if he were suspected and in danger.

He went with her to the little station, promising to return to Olga.

"You have come a long journey just to warn me, Irene," he said; "won't you come another journey with me?"

She understood, looked at him bravely and shook her head.

"It is impossible," she said.

He could not understand, feeling a mystery. But he did not think he had a right at that moment to say more, for he saw danger, and Siberia is not a home of prospective happiness.

"You will take care, Alan?" she said, her voice trembling with emotion as the train came in sight.

"All I can—for your sake."

"For your own—and mine."

She sat back in the carriage, tears from mixed emotions starting to her eyes as the train went off and she left Alan on the platform.

He watched the train go out of sight and wondered and wondered . . .

CHAPTER XV

"A cheer then, for the noble breast that fears not danger s post,
And like the lifeboat, proves a friend, when friends are wanted most." —ELIZA COOK.

ALAN walked through the dust of that Russian village with perplexing and odd thoughts. Irene had come all the way from London to warn him. It seemed marvellous in its unexpectedness and entrancing in its promise. He began to think of her "impossible." He could not understand it. She— He cast a lingering look after her and then set his thoughts sternly on the realities of the moment as if he would warn his heart and save it trouble.

Suspected! For himself he did not fear. He did not mind the risk he ran—though Irene's eyes heightened it—so much as he felt the disappointment of hopes.

Olga met him with a grave face. When the door was shut she said—

"The news is serious?"

"Yes."

"You can trust your friend?—I mean her observation is good?"

"I think so. And she would not have come all the

way from London to St Petersburg to warn me if she had not good cause."

"You are lucky—in having such a friend."

Alan did not answer. So dear a friendship might make for pain.

"What are we to do?" she said.

"We are obviously watched—at least I am; so the best thing seems to be for me to throw my watchers off the scent."

"One has to be careful not to throw one's friends off the scent too."

"If we could only find out how much is known."

"She said you had been watched."

"Yes." Alan wished for definiteness as all do who labour in uncertainty. Here, too, it meant the difference probably between escape and capture. "Merely that I was suspected and watched—"

"If only we knew how much they know!"

They groped and were silent, longing for light.

Alan said—

"At present I only know that if they give me the signal I have work to do which I am ready to do."

Olga nodded.

"And we may get the signal to-morrow."

The proximity of the great coup seemed to awe them both. They knew the risk they ran and the hope that went with their effort. Excitement was natural, for great deeds of much delicate preparation are not to be done in sluggish blood.

"To-morrow," Alan murmured. "Well, the sooner the better."

Olga had both her hands between her knees and was squeezing them tightly, looking into that idealist city that always beckoned her with such a loving and irresistible gesture. She did not answer.

"Well, I shall risk it," said Alan, quietly.

Olga smiled.

"I am so glad," she said. She was of the stuff of which martyrs are made, which carries causes to their goal and without which nothing heroic can be accomplished. Sometimes—probably often—there goes with this spirit a disregard for facts that occasionally proves fatal: but without the daring that would take the risk the great heights would never be reached. We never fly high when we take great pains to anchor ourselves to safe places.

Alan caught Olga's spirit and liked it—it was akin to his own.

"We will find out if anything is wrong so far as we know—I suppose you can do that?"

"Yes."

"If not, we proceed as arranged."

"Let me tell you what has been arranged inside the palace. There are—as perhaps you may know—inside the grounds of Tsarskoe Selo all sorts of odd things—an ornamental building several storeys high, dolls' houses of the grand-duchesses, a Chinese tower, a theatre, a Chinese village even, Turkish kiosks and even a Dutch and Swiss dairy. The children play in and about any of these places and they are convenient for hiding. Behind one of these things a deal may happen that goes unobserved. Besides, the grounds

are of very great extent and there is plenty of timber. Now the little Tsarevitch plays in this park with his nurse, and there are sentinels at the gates. All seems well guarded. But we have friends inside, one of whom will see that the nurse is rendered helpless at a given moment and another will be the sentry at the gate. The little boy, by a series of manœuvres, has been induced to go nearer and nearer to the entrance to the old garden and now he clamours to go there. So once the nurse is—chloroformed, I expect—the boy will swiftly be carried to the gate, the sentry will open and you and I will be in readiness. You will go full speed on the road towards Moscow till I tell you where to put me down and you must make for the frontier. Is it good, comrade?"

"Almost too good."

Alan was struck with the care and minute organisation that this plot had entailed. He had come with the chauffeur from outside Russia while seemingly the other agents had been preparing their part under the eyes of the ubiquitous police. The chauffeur who had come with Alan was not to go on the momentous run; Alan was then to drive himself. They all had passports to leave Russia, for the rulers of that slowly civilising land make it quite as difficult for a person to get out as to get in.

Olga was excited and paced the room anxiously.

"Shall we fail?" she said.

"Let us hope not."

"If we win"—her voice took a ring—"without the shedding of a drop of blood—liberty."

"Yes, liberty," said Alan, quietly, feeling probably quite as keenly as Olga, but being less demonstrative.

After a pause Alan said—

"Suppose I am watched and yet the plot has not been discovered, how could I throw them off the scent?"

Conspirators in Russia know only too well what it means to alter plans at the last moment. There are so many links in the chain, so many necessary to the success of the scheme that the capture of one may mean the spoiling of all. And yet what a labour when months of watching and waiting and planning and plotting must be done all over again! This has often happened. Those who work in the dark must expect to work double. Happily the Russian in general is a patient creature. One can readily understand how these two desired to avoid all chance of failure. Yet there was the warning. To ignore that would be folly.

"It may be to-morrow," said Alan. "If only I could—" He hesitated. He felt he could devise nothing. If all had been discovered then there was merely the chance of flight. If nothing had been discovered and only he were suspected—then the idea came like ideas will to those who seek them—came like one born in due season, a messenger, a voice calling to arms, a beacon to encourage.

"I've got it," he said, jumping up.

Olga waited. That dreamy but determined face, with the black, piercing eyes, seeming ready for anything.

"I won't go back to that hotel. The chauffeur must say he has left me on the Moscow road and has to fetch me to-morrow. If we can get a man of my height—and goggles make us all alike in appearance—who will ride in my car we may throw my watchers off the scent."

Like most of the women who are prominent members of the Russian revolutionary party, she showed a clear and fine capacity for plotting. Details came naturally to her as they do to women, and the difficulties were disposed of or circumvented without trouble. Alan was astonished at her quick grasp of fact, of time and likelihood. No wonder the names of women occupy such high places in the roll of Underground Russia, for there they not only dare but they are able to propose and dispose.

They arranged the details between them and prayed that the signal might be for the morrow. All that was wanted now was that the sentry on duty at the gate should be a friend.

Olga guaranteed to find a motor and a man, and the motor was to be changed for the one Alan had been using, if that were advisable, by the aid of a coat of paint or plenty of glazed paper.

The next day dawned. Momentous days in the history of the human race have rarely opened to nature's *éclat.* The sun and the winds in their great deeps of age and influence ignore the doings of transient men. "When beggars die there are no comets seen." There are seen just as many as when a Sultan falls.

There were many people waiting for a signal that day. About half-past ten a motor-car went down the Tsarskoe Selo road, and anxious eyes watched it. It ran through the pretty village of Tsarskoe Selo, with its broad and well-kept streets and pretty villas, and passed by the wall of the park. At the entrance to the old garden there are two quaint figures, an Egyptian fancy scrawled in hieroglyphics and symbolic pictures, and as the car passed this gate—running slowly now—the driver looked keenly. Suddenly his eyes lit up with a blaze, he dropped a white handkerchief over his car, opened the throttle and, having played his little *rôle*, he dashed towards the frontier. So like the lot of man!

Others were now to carry on the plan. They appeared in a little while. There was Alan, eager, alert and keen; Olga watching and waiting. They stopped the car a dozen yards beyond the gate; it is always safer to have crossed the rubicon when the press comes.

The signal was there which had been placed by the friendly sentry to show all was well. They waited the nurse. They began to get anxious. As no one came morbid fears taunted them.

"What's up?" said Alan, quietly.

"We must wait," said Olga, staring at those closed gates.

They waited, beginning to fear complications now.

"There's the signal! Something must have gone wrong in the park."

"The little boy may have gone in the wrong direction," said Alan. "But we daren't go away."

"No, no!"

And they watched those gates almost fiercely. Happily the road was deserted, but there were people moving about in the village streets, who might at any time come this way, and an awkward vehicle, a cantankerous policeman might upset everything.

Still no one came. The sentry seemed missing, which was odd. But there was a movement at the gates at last. Voices were heard inside the park, and Alan and Olga looked at each other for one brief moment and then stared wildly to see a group of soldiers and officials, led by a man with a pale face and red hair, rush to the gate and, pointing to the car, dash into the road.

Olga gave one wild sob. Alan did not even do that. He turned instinctively, opened the throttle of his car and before the nearest was two yards from him, the motor bounded on its way and left the group behind.

"Fire! Fire!" shouted a voice.

"After them!" shouted another.

There were shots, but they were futile.

"Stoop!" said Alan, but Olga sat rigid; the disappointment was too much. So he put his arm round her and forced her to avoid the chance bullet.

They had certainly escaped for the moment, and before the pursuit could get immediately dangerous, Alan had driven the car thirty miles on the road. Their difficulty now was to get out of the country.

Alan and Olga had not spoken after getting out of Tsarskoe Selo. She looked dejected.

"Lost again," she said.

"Only to win at the last," he replied encouragingly.

"This was so hopeful."

"All is not gone—we still live."

"Those in the park—" She gave a shudder.

Alan nodded.

"What shall you do?" he asked. "As was arranged?"

"Yes, I can hide here. You will leave the country?"

"It will be best. Won't you come too?"

She shook her head.

"My home is here. I will live and die here. I go to another province—we always have our passports."

They rode on till they reached the place they had originally appointed to separate. Here Olga was to look to her own safety, Alan was to leave the car in other hands.

She was no longer dejected; the Slav is naturally buoyant.

"Good-bye, comrade," said Alan; "we shall have better luck, let us hope, next time."

"I will hope for that and for no better comrade," she said.

"I wonder who betrayed us," said Alan.

"We have been betrayed so often. Did you see the man with the red hair at the gate?"

"Red hair? No."

"His face seemed familiar—that was all. But I can't recall his name."

"It has been a disappointment, but that is a common crop in this world."

"It is the best-known crop in Russia—if you happen to think."

He nodded and they parted.

Alan, after getting rid of the car which was at once altered out of all recognition, was taken to the house of a friend, one of these Ukrivatelli who help the revolutionary cause by concealing the active members who seek a refuge.

The man was a Government official—so odd a comment on Russian methods!—and he treated Alan with the greatest kindness and hospitality. He passed him on to another of his kind and so Alan made the journey nearly to the frontier, always in danger, always in hiding. He was far from well through his constant confinement following on the excitement of the attempt, and he longed to escape to a land where he might breathe the fresh air and call his soul his own.

He was within sight of the frontier at last, and all was accomplished save the ultimate run. The "concealers" could help him no more in their own manner: he had to be conveyed over the frontier. Three days he remained in his last home before venturing out and then his host told him all was ready. He was to make a dash over the frontier to the house of a poor Jew, who lived near the border and was willing to receive him in return for a sum of money.

The money was easily forthcoming and then Alan learned the plan of escape.

He was to creep into a cart and be lightly covered over with hay. He would then be taken to a point as near to the frontier as possible, and at the most opportune moment he must have recourse to his agility and nimbleness and dash out of the land of the Tsars.

Alan, well covered with hay, was taken in the jolting cart as the evening drew on and at a spot not too near the frontier to excite suspicion, was carefully tipped up very neatly — the cart prudently being between him and the block-house where the frontier soldiers were—and then packed by the man who brought him.

"Don't move, Barin," said the man, as he put the hay in a heap. "They can't see anything. When you get up keep level with the road. Get under the wire, and the house is two hundred yards up the hill on the opposite side. May the Saints preserve you!"

Then the man, humming a tune and crossing himself as he passed the ikon on the building near, went back, leaving in the field, covered with hay, as unsuspicious a protuberance as Alan could claim to have ever been.

Curiously enough, a horse strayed and started nibbling at the hay. Alan was in fear lest he should be discovered, and wondered if he had better make a dash at once.

He cautiously looked out and saw the land quiet, the sentry seemingly dosing, the watch ineffective.

A wire was all that divided Germany from Russia—security (in a comparative sense) from danger. The boundary line between heaven and hell is not wide: it is all an affair of getting on the right side of the fence.

Alan decided to make his attempt. The sentry was leaning on his musket, his form silhouetted against the sky, for the night was not very dark. Alan moved slowly forward, creeping cautiously towards the wire. The sentry looked up and Alan could only see that he had turned and was unable to see—without betraying his presence—what more the man did. For two minutes nothing seemed to move and Alan thought he might as well go forward. He crawled a yard and then there was an exclamation from the sentry. Alan felt the moment had arrived for desperate action. He leapt to his feet and bolted for the wire. The soldier shouted and aimed. Alan dived for the ground. There was a splash of mud but Alan was under the wire; the sentry hesitated—he dare not shoot a man on German ground—and Alan, scarcely knowing if he were free, ran desperately to the hut that was to be his refuge. The soldier shouted and looked angry but Alan was safe. The Jew was behind the door and opened it as Alan knocked. So ended the plot that nearly succeeded.

CHAPTER XVI

"Calamity is man's true touchstone."
—BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

HOPE is part of a healthy common-sense. He who has lost hope has lost the sane view of things: the small has been elevated to the great, the transient to the perennial. The wise man is neither more nor less hopeful than he should be: the foolish are both. We live in hope more than we think. That is because the race has had the good sense to make certain aspects of hope into instinct. The right height at which hope's thermometer should stand in a given circumstance is a calculation of great nicety, too nice to get a general agreement.

After the failure of their plot the revolutionaries in London, Berlin and St Petersburg who had been concerned were naturally disappointed: but they did not lose hope. Only death can quench that fire in the heart of the Russian who loves freedom.

Alan felt the failure greatly. He got out of Germany as quickly as he could—for there are times when the German Government is uncommonly desirous of pleasing the Tsar and his advisers. He went first to Switzerland and then to London.

It was of Irene he thought. From Zurich he sent

a telegram to her. "Safe.—ALAN." He thought that her due.

He was tortured with her behaviour, not understanding it; and the incomprehensible is of all things the most teasing. She had gone all the way from London to St Petersburg to warn him that he was in danger and she refused to marry him. From the one action he deduced love: the refusal became inexplicable. He had been greatly tossed by the waves of emotion when he had thought of Irene. He had hoped to win her; he had given up hope. And now once more she drew him on—not wilfully, for Irene was not of that order—and he was again in perplexity. No one cares for the doubtful. Alan went to Hampstead the day after he arrived in London.

Irene received him and they seemed to have so much in common, so much that was superlatively feeling, that they shook hands before speaking and greeted without a word.

"I am so glad, Alan," she said quietly.

"And I—grateful."

She shook her head.

"It was nothing. I only did what anybody—at any rate, you would have done the same."

"For you."

"For anybody."

"I doubt it."

Irene was clearly uncomfortable at the personal turn of the conversation and sought to deflect it.

"I suppose you failed, Alan?"

"Yes."

"Are you very disappointed?"

"Yes. We hoped to strike a great blow without hurting a hair of anybody's head."

"What a pity to fail!"

"Yes. Russia would have entered on a new era. Germany, since 1870, would not have shown such great strides as Russia in the next twenty years, if only we had got what we aimed at."

"I wish you had won," she said, and she seemed to be thinking of something else which gave her no pleasure.

"How did you find out that I was suspected?" he asked.

"I—I can't tell you, Alan."

"I wish you could. I am not revengeful, but the information might be a warning: we may have a spy in our midst."

She shook her head. How did she know? She could only tell by betraying Countess Brinski.

"They caught none of us," he said. "That, at least, was something."

"If you had been caught—" She stopped.

But she was too late. He was not to be stopped now.

"Yes?" he said, leaning towards her.

"What would they have done to you?"

He leaned forward and took her hand.

"Whatever it might have been, Irene, it would have been assuaged by thoughts of you."

She seemed to hesitate. Should she allow him to

say what he wished? Should she consent? The earthly Paradise is tempting.

"I must ask you once again, Irene—don't say no. You know I love you: it is futile to tell you that. But after this I should be foolish not to ask you once again to marry me."

She shook her head quietly and spoke in a low voice, though she made no attempt to withdraw her hand.

"I—can't."

"Can't?—Is it can't?" He came nearer to her. "Tell me, Irene—do you love me?"

She made no answer.

He took her face in his hands and looked in her eyes and kissed her. He put an arm round her as if to mark a possession.

"Say yes, dear—say yes."

But she shook her head.

He was greatly perplexed by this attitude. The one ecstasy of love was his—she loved him. But she denied him. She was not for him. "Why? why?" he cried.

He looked into her face and tried to read her, to overcome her with looks. But she would not meet him now.

She stood up, pale, clenching her fists, battling, as it were, against bars.

He came to her side.

"Irene, what is it? Tell me why you say no."

"I can't."

"Why won't you marry me?"

She shook her head, her face betraying her struggle to repress her longing.

"Irene, I don't mind anything that has gone, anything that has to come if you are my wife. Say you'll marry me."

She was staring in front of her, clearly trying to anchor her mind to a decision; but the tempests of feeling were giving that tossed bark no calm. Was it to be yes or no?

Alan saw her predicament; saw, at least, that she hesitated and struggled, and he strove to dip the balance on his side.

"Fear nothing that has gone and nothing there is to come. Say yes, dear."

She was a very tremulous mortal now, hanging over a precipice. A little word, and how much she did!

"We'll go anywhere you like. We will live in Europe or Asia, east or west. I shall be happy with you. You love me, Irene—you will never escape that. Marry me."

A smile of gladness lit up her face. It was as if she saw a promised land at last. Then a set look came about her mouth and eyes. The look of the martyr who counts all as dross.

"I would, Alan," she said, and her eyes told of her honesty, "but I—can't."

He looked at her hesitatingly. Should he press? There was a limit to persuasion. Can't!—the word struck him as horrible. His eyes lost their hope then, for he felt it was an affair in which hope was out of place.

"Can't," he said aloud.

She nodded faintly, with a humble look in her eyes. Love is always humble.

"I should have been more — forbearing," he said. "I have intruded again, Irene. I had no intention after — last time, but the journey — you understand?"

"I understand."

"You forgive me."

She nodded her head. Speech was too painful at that moment. He took her in his arms as she broke down.

"It is enough for me, Irene, that you would, but you can't. I will only ask one thing. If ever you can, will you let me know? — give me a hint?"

"It isn't likely," she said. "I think you ought to know. I should not have let you say so much or— do so much. I have done wrong, but I—" She shook her head wearily and he understood. "I have promised to marry Stephan, my—cousin."

Alan felt this blow. Promised to another and taking his kisses! But he scarcely formulated the charge in his own mind. He saw the pathos of the situation. He knew she loved him, and she was going to marry someone else.

"We have both got a burden," he said. "Let's bear it decently."

That phrase was her dearest recollection. She was thrilled as she heard it, but could not trust herself to make a reply. She had decided to bear

her burden with decency. She had given her tribute to love.

Alan prepared to go, and was about to bid her farewell when the maid brought in a telegram. "You will excuse me?" said Irene.

"Certainly."

"That will do," said Irene to the maid, and she stood for a moment in deep thought.

Alan turned round.

"Shall we say good-bye?" he said.

She handed him the telegram.

"Would you care to read that?"

It ran—

"Prepare to come at once to St Petersburg. Have been appointed Governor of Minsk. Letter following.—STEPHAN."

He felt there was no gainsaying that. It rounded the afternoon's scene.

"You will go?"

"Yes."

He put out his hand.

"I shall hope for your happiness, Irene."

"And I yours, Alan."

"Do you wish anything unsaid or undone between us?"

"Not for my own sake," she said.

"I am content then."

He held her hand tightly and looked at her fast weakening eyes. He gave her a look of encouragement and confidence.

"Peace be with you," he said.

She nodded, unable to do more. And he was gone.

Alan felt as he went away that there was something he could not understand. Irene loved him and refused him. And like a man, resourceful and daring he longed to think of ways and means to circumvent her refusal. She loved and rejected. He saw, though, that he must respect her attitude. To have taken "no" too readily might have been foolish; to press too much was unfair. He had already asked her too often for his peace of mind and hers, and her scruples deserved regard. What was it that made her refuse? She loved him—he was sure of that. She loved him—and yet she was to marry another.

She was going to Russia to marry Stephan Drumitz. Alan cast an eye over his world of desires and hopes. The prospect was not pleasing. The great plot had failed; love was denied. He must bear his burden decently: that *rôle* was still left him. It is the bulwark of the brave.

The Countess Brinski, as may be imagined, had passed many an uncomfortable quarter of an hour since Irene had left for St Petersburg to warn Alan. There was the danger she would be too late; there was the danger she might tell of the countess's part in the story; there was the greatest danger of all—she might marry Alan.

The countess was not to be envied, unless one desires the dismal. That was before Irene returned, of course. Afterwards affairs looked brighter. Irene told of her success and reticence. The latter was very pleasing to the countess, who naturally pro-

tested her innocence—"actually thought she was helping Alan," and so forth.

Irene, who knew Stephan, probably blamed the lady little. When the telegram had arrived from Alan saying he was safe, the countess was in rapture. She loved Alan. The anxiety she had lately experienced on his behalf had deepened her love for him. She had felt how very great her interest was in his well-being—how dear he was to her.

When she called at the Albany she was in the right humour of love. She blamed herself for her indiscretion very freely, because she saw there was no evil consequence, and all she had to guard against was an incautious betrayal of her part in the plot's leakage. The gratitude at Alan's safety and the touch of humility implied in the self-castigation gave her an attractive attitude. She was well-dressed too.

She came into Alan's room with a gasp of delight. She wanted to let her feelings be seen of course. She shook hands warmly.

"How d' you do?" said Alan, somewhat tamely.

"What a joy to see you back safe! I got so afraid."

"There was practically no danger."

"That's only because you tell the tale. Was it—a success?"

Alan shook his head.

"No."

"Are you very disappointed?"

"Very."

"There will be other chances, won't there?"

"Perhaps."

"Why 'perhaps?'"

"We ought to have succeeded, and we only failed because we were betrayed."

The countess was glad the light was not on her face. She had no idea Alan was going to look and speak like that.

"Betrayed?" she said, acting well.

"Yes."

"How awful! But are you sure? Did a number of people or only a few know of the plot?"

"There were three committees working and the plot may have been discovered at any of the three places."

"Have you any suspicion?"

"No. When we have—" He nodded significantly.

She did not like the nod and the suggestion seemed barbarous. She began to think she had been a fool. Suppose Stephan betrayed her? Then she checked the riotous nature of her thoughts. She felt she was behaving in the best possible way to drag suspicion on herself.

"Perhaps," she said—"perhaps the police found it out. They are very clever, I believe. They seem to find out everything. But at any rate, Alan, I am glad you got back safe. Were you really in any danger?"

"There was just a chance we might get caught, but there was no great danger."

"I hope you won't embark on so perilous a journey again—at least not for a long time."

She looked very solicitous and very attractive and her anxiety was not to be unnoticed.

"Well, it can't happen again very quickly, for these plots are not arranged in five minutes."

"Of course not. And to think it came to nothing. I suppose that was the result?"

"Yes."

"What a pity! And you hoped for so much, didn't you?"

"More than I care to repeat."

"I am sorry. I always distrust the police. They seem able to discover anything. They say they have spies everywhere, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if they had discovered it. I feel disappointed too. Things are no better in Russia, I suppose?"

The countess was succeeding even better than she had imagined likely. A social training in a really good set makes a woman quite a fair actress. She can lie with ease and conviction; she hides her feelings without trouble; and can give wrong impressions without embarrassment.

Alan shook his head.

"If only we had succeeded!" Then he stopped. What he had hoped for had not happened and he felt he only taunted himself with the remembrance of his dreams.

"By the bye," said the countess, "have you heard that Irene Drumitz is going to get married again?" He didn't look at her and she watched his face eagerly.

"Yes," he said.

The countess was somewhat surprised at his knowledge. She guessed at once—he had proposed to Irene and she had told. His attitude blazed out that story.

"Somewhat unexpected, isn't it?"

"She is—perhaps." His thoughts seemed to be running curiously.

"Cousin, I hear?"

"Yes."

"Is she going to live in London?"

"No, Russia. He has just been made governor of some province or other."

"And she is going out to him?"

"Yes."

The countess felt she was a favourite of fortune. She forgot her own trouble, forgot the plot and her part in its betrayal, forgot all save the fact that Alan knew Irene was going to be married and leave England for Russia. The road seemed clear for her, and all that remained to be done was a skilful playing of the cards.

Alan's attitude too suggested a line of action not to be neglected. The countess saw that if Alan cared at all for Irene he would not hesitate to speak after her journey to St Petersburg. He had obviously spoken and been refused. Irene had told him of her marriage to Stephan. Now, while he suffered from the blow, was the time to allure him. He must find sympathy in another woman. The countess had a liberal dose of worldly wisdom and the habits and customs of men in a humour to marry were not un-

familiar to her. When a man is refused by one woman, the comfort of another is apt to be very attractive. At such times it does not do to be too backward. The modest retiring woman gets no chance; shyness is disastrous. The pushing woman whom no man (and all the smart women) would accuse of scheming, wins in an easy and graceful style. It is the way of the world: the prizes do not go to the backward. When people get what they desire it is because they have striven for it. The wise woman knows it. She would be foolish to shut her eyes.

"I suppose," said the countess, "we shall not stop trying to do something because this plot has failed?"

"I hope not."

"If there is more money wanted, Alan, I shall always be ready to do what I can. I haven't the nerve to do the things you dare do."

"The cause wants money badly and you help it forward by money as well as some of us do by —bungling."

"You didn't bungle."

"I failed."

"But it was not your fault."

He paused before replying, and she noticed his serious look with some anxiety. Why did he harp on this string? She began to think worry might come out of it.

"It is amazing what Russia has lost by treachery," he said.

"Those horrid police!"

And then seemingly thinking that he was not entertaining this pretty woman in the way she deserved, Alan flung off his unpleasant thoughts and set himself to please his guest. She responded with alacrity and the visit was a great success from her point of view. She welcomed his smiles with gladness, repaid them with interest and made him pleased that she had called. He promised of course to return the call and she returned to the Carlton in a happy frame of mind; so happy, in fact, that she was inclined to pooh-pooh the idea that anything could possibly be discovered to her hurt in her relations with Stephan Drumitz.

Alan, alone in his room, thought of the faded flowers of desire. He murmured the name "Irene," then: "That chapter is closed; I must bear it decently."

CHAPTER XVII

"Attempt the end and never stand to doubt:
Nothing's so hard but search will find it out."
—HERRICK.

THE London committee of the revolutionaries met in gloom. In that dismal room in which we had seen them meet before with encouragement begotten of their plot, now we can see them gather together in a humour void of joy. Appolon Baritz had played on his violin haunting strains from Beethoven till his companions dropped into postures of dreaming, and longed to realise the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and yet feared.

"Play something to make us forget, Appolon," said Bloch. Baritz gave them "Peer Gynt," and they forgot their dreams in the Witches' Dance.

George Poletkevitch arrived, and was greeted with warmth. He always seemed to bring comfort with him.

"Has he not come yet?" he asked.

"Not yet."

He referred to Alan.

"He will come?" asked Krakoff.

"Yes, he will come," replied Poletkevitch.

"Betrayed?" asked Kopenouski, referring to the failure of the St Petersburg attempt.

"They were ready."

"We are too delicate," said Krakoff. "We must strike hard." The failure had made him angrier than ever against the Russian rulers.

"Betrayed!" repeated Kopenouski, as though he were feeling very downcast.

Then Alan arrived. They received him with a kind sympathy which showed they did not blame him for the failure of the plot, and he was invited to tell what had happened. He went through the story of his doings from the journey from Berlin to the escape over the frontier, omitting, however, all mention of Irene.

"Then they knew," said Bloch; "you were lucky to get away."

Alan had not at first intended to mention the *rôle* played by Irene. Since his last interview with her it was plain why she had come, and he had no desire, now she was about to marry her cousin, to drag into any prominence a deed which was purely personal. But he felt he was keeping back something that ought to be told. Concealment did not suit his frank nature; besides there was praise due to Irene, and he began to feel he robbed her of that.

"And your comrades—did they get away?" asked Gradoff.

"I believe so. I sincerely hope so."

"One did at least—my sister," said Krakoff.

"Your sister?" asked Alan.

"She was your companion," said Krakoff.

"I congratulate you," said Alan; "a noble girl!"

"She will not always get away," he said calmly. "Her blood will be the seed of Russian freedom."

"If they knew of the plot, I wonder why they didn't catch you," said the lawyer, Anton Bloch.

"I don't think they knew of the plot in time or they must have caught us. They probably guessed it at the last moment, but—I know they suspected me."

"Suspected you?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that?" asked Poletkevitch, quickly.

"I was told."

"Who told you?"

Alan hesitated, and then said—

"Madame Drumitz."

"Madame Drumitz!" The name was repeated by Gradoff, Kopenouski and Baritz in a breath. Anton Bloch looked at the table and was curiously silent.

"The widow of the traitor, eh?" said Demetrius Krakoff, with an unfriendly accent.

George Poletkevitch seemed to be waiting for somebody to speak, but the others looked at each other curiously. So he said—

"How did she know?"

"She didn't tell me," replied Alan. "She merely warned me that I was suspected."

"The widow of the traitor," repeated Krakoff.

"When did she warn you?" asked Bloch.

"When I was in St Petersburg."

The men were too surprised to speak readily.

"I thought she was living in Hampstead," said Krakoff.

"So she is. She came to St Petersburg to warn me."

The phrase was of that order that demands delicate comment. For a woman to travel from London to St Petersburg to warn a man that he was in danger presumes a feeling of very deep interest. The men were silent for a moment lest in haste they spoke the incautious word.

"Did she know of the whole plot?" asked Bloch.

"No. She didn't tell me how she knew that I was in danger, but she said I was suspected. She told me she had seen two men watching my hotel, but she knew nothing besides my danger."

"Curious!"

"How did she learn that?"

"She seems a friend, at any rate," said Baritz.

"The point is that she knew," said Poletkevitch.

"Not the plot," said Alan.

"But something."

They all appeared disturbed in mind. How was it Madame Drumitz knew anything at all? That she had taken the trouble to go to St Petersburg was an incident that might be ignored. It was friendly: it caused no heartburning. But this suspicion of Alan showed a leaking of the plot. Who was the traitor?

"And if she knew something," said Kopenouski, "it is no wonder others knew!"

"She will tell how she knew, won't she?" asked Krakoff.

"No," said Alan.

They were all silent again. They felt they could not handle Madame Drumitz with perfect liberty, for she had shown a fine devotion to one of their number.

"Couldn't you persuade her?" asked Bloch of Alan.

"I didn't try to persuade her. She told me she would rather not say how she found it out. She knew no more than that I was suspected—so she said. And, comrades, I believe her implicitly."

They nodded willingly.

"She can't be an enemy or she wouldn't have warned you," said Bloch, "except— Do you mind if I ask if this lady is anything to you—more than a friend, I mean?"

"She is going to marry her cousin," said Alan, simply. "We are just friends."

"Then for friendship's sake she travelled all the way to St Petersburg to warn you that you were suspected. Madame Drumitz knows more than she told." It was Bloch who spoke.

"Remember," said Alan, "she knows nothing about the plot. She just knew I was suspected."

"I think," said Krakoff, "it would be as well if we discovered what madame does know or, at least, how

she got to know you were suspected. Her husband —died, you remember."

"Traitor, eh?" said Kopenouski.

George Poletkevitch leaned forward with his arms on the table.

"Suppose, Alan, you try to get from her how she knew."

"I have already asked her."

"She refused to tell?"

"Yes. She said she would rather I didn't ask."

Krakoff looked at Poletkevitch.

"Suppose you ask her?" he said.

Poletkevitch looked at Alan: the mission might be delicate.

"I don't mind," said Alan, who put implicit faith in Irene, and felt no fears whatever on her account. Danger to her was a point of view that did not occur to him. She, at least, was free from ugly traits; she was consequently free from danger. Confidence in a man or woman saves us much uneasiness.

The others were not so satisfied. The name Drumitz had an unpleasant sound in their ears. Irene's reticence was not calculated to calm their fears. Even if she were free from all doubt, how did she know? At least, her assistance might be useful in tracing the traitor.

"Suppose she refuses to tell," said Baritz.

That was a contingency.

"We must make it our business to see she does tell," said Demetrius Krakoff, earnestly; he did not like the name of Drumitz.

They finally agreed that Poletkevitch should call on Irene, and endeavour to persuade her to tell how she had learned that Alan was suspected.

Poletkevitch and Alan walked away together. Alan was not feeling altogether comfortable. Since Irene's name had been mentioned, it seemed to him it should have been with gratitude. Yet there was an air of suspicion cast about her. Instead of praise for her action there was the hint: "She knew more than she cared to tell," also the recurrent phrase of Krakoff: "The widow of a traitor."

Alan tried to be just, and saw that his comrades could not be expected to take his view of Irene's conduct. His friendship was obvious—she had journeyed to St Petersburg to warn him—so his view of her was likely to be prejudiced.

George Poletkevitch was not a talkative man. Conversation used to be a daring matter at one time in Russia, and for a man who thought about politics overmuch, it was apt to be dangerous. Matters have improved, but it is not yet a matter of comfort to discuss the Government adversely. There are people who decry the talkative person, and uplift the silent. It is a wrong process. Chatter is generally superfluous and often boring, but the art of talking is one to be cultivated. A man's thoughts, if they are any good, should be communicated to his fellows. The thinkers don't talk enough; it is the chatterers who make speech a term of reproach. Silence is of the beasts that perish; speech is man's glory.

George Poletkevitch generally spoke to the point. He and Alan walked a little way in silence; their thoughts were interesting.

"Madame Drumitz," said Poletkevitch, "is an amiable woman, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"You trust her, Alan?"

"Absolutely."

Poletkevitch was silent.

"Why do you ask the question?" said Alan.

After a slight pause—one might have guessed that he wondered whether to mention the subject or not—Poletkevitch said—

"Do you remember Vipoff calling on her?"

"Vipoff—the spy?" Alan turned and looked at his companion. "Yes, what of it? You surely don't suspect Madame Drumitz had anything to do with him as a spy?"

George Poletkevitch was not hurried into answering. He looked at Alan fixedly, and spoke calmly after deliberation.

"Husband a traitor; a spy calls on her; she knows you are suspected."

Alan's emotions were furiously stirred. Irene an accomplice of traitors and spies! He felt so convinced of her innocence that the accusation could not leave him calm. It was his feelings that were anchored in confidence, and his reason could frame no remonstrance to the charge. He looked at Poletkevitch strangely.

"You—you don't surely suspect her?" he said.

George Poletkevitch said slowly—

"To mention is not necessarily to suspect; to suspect is not to prove."

"No, no." But Alan was not deluded. There was the suspicion. "It isn't possible for her to be a traitor," he said warmly.

"Um!" said George Poletkevitch.

"I know her too well. She is the soul of honour. Her sympathies are with us. Paul Drumitz was—well, we will ignore him: but she is different."

"I wonder why Vipoff called on her."

"Perhaps to spy on her; there may be dozens of reasons."

"There may, as you say, be dozens of reasons."

"I would stake my life on her innocence, George Paulovitch."

"Don't," said Poletkevitch, quietly. "She is a woman. They are difficult to understand in some matters. In love you may rely on them, but in affairs of another kind they can delude the most searching. Mind, I prefer no charge, as I know so little, but she does know more than she cares to tell."

"What she has not told is not to her discredit," said Alan, warmly, "and I would trust her word at any time."

Poletkevitch took Alan's arm.

"She has a good friend in you," he said.

"She surely proved herself a good friend to me."

"You mean in going to St Petersburg?"

"Yes."

Poletkevitch nodded. They walked on in silence. Alan was greatly disturbed. The reflection on Irene's honour was more than he could bear patiently and he almost felt that Poletkevitch was not treating the affair in a proper and right spirit. Irene suspected! That thought made Alan's emotions capture all his reason. He *felt* she was innocent, and a whole world in arms would not have convinced him she was guilty any more than the most plausible suspicions. He might have admitted proof, of course. That he had nothing but his faith in her to utter in reply to the aspersions made him all the more uncomfortable. Poletkevitch realised his friend's attitude and said after a time—

"Going to marry her cousin, is she?"

"Yes, Stephan Drumitz."

"Another Drumitz?"

"Yes. He has just been appointed Governor of Minsk."

"Ah! Ah!" The first ejaculation was one expressive of a fact's acceptance, the second was different. It struck a peculiar note: there was colour in it, almost warmth. Poletkevitch looked at Alan almost piercingly, and seemed about to speak. Then that habitual reticence came to him, the words faded, and he said nothing. One does not lose reticent habits of speech very quickly even in England.

But Alan felt that more might be said, in fact that more ought to be said.

"Why 'Ah?'" he asked.

George Poletkevitch was in no hurry to reply. He walked on a yard or two and then said—

"Stephan Drumitz has been appointed Governor of Minsk, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Quite recently. Madame Drumitz received a telegram telling her the news only yesterday."

George Poletkevitch nodded his head suggestively. Alan was not dull.

"You would suggest he was a friend of the Government?"

"And—she marries him."

Alan bit his lip. The blow was harder than Poletkevitch knew. Stephan Drumitz was going to marry Irene, and he was a friend of the Government. If the illegals did not love the name of Drumitz, was it any wonder? Was there much to wonder at in their suspicion of Irene? George Poletkevitch summed it up—

"Husband a traitor; spy calls on her; second husband just been rewarded by the Government."

Alan even now felt no loss of confidence in Irene. The atmosphere was bad, but that was her misfortune. She was no spy or traitor, she did not trade on the efforts of her fellow-men for freedom. But there was the fact: Stephan Drumitz had been appointed Governor of Minsk, and she was about to marry him.

"She's innocent," said Alan, feeling she deserved and needed a defender.

Poletkevitch nodded his head.

"Governor of Minsk. Why?" He stopped in his walk and looked at Alan as if he expected him to answer.

"Reward," suggested Alan.

The big man nodded.

"Why?" he asked.

They looked at each other: the same thought came to both. Alan at once left the man and defended the woman.

"She knew nothing, I will swear," he said.

Poletkevitch looked serious.

"Drumitz discovers plot, eh? His reward is the Governorship of Minsk. He has been staying with her, has he not?"

"Yes."

They walked on together in silence. They had reached the top of Sloane Street, and Alan suggested they should continue through the Park. It was a fine night, with the stars showing in plenty.

"He may be—anything," said Alan, "but she is without reproach."

"Maybe, maybe. If he knew, it might explain how she knew too."

"Would it explain how she was able to come to St Petersburg to warn me?"

"Where was he?"

Alan could not fight against Irene's environment:

it was only herself he trusted: in her honour he put an implicit faith. But he began to be tormented by his companion's suggestions. Why did she marry Stephan Drumitz?—she did not love him. He thought of her sad attitudes, her look of the bearer of a burden— What did it mean?

The widow of a traitor, was she marrying a spy?

What was the mystery?

George Poletkevitch was eyeing Alan closely, and seemed to read his thoughts.

"She may be innocent—"

"She is," said Alan, impetuously.

"She may be. But round about her—"

"That's it. The others may be traitors, but not she. I know her heart. She is no spy, no mean thing." Alan was excited and speaking warmly. They walked along the Row, and the openness of the place invited a frankness of mind.

"Did you call there often?" asked Poletkevitch.

"Occasionally."

"Did you talk politics?"

"Very rarely. I always regarded her as a friend. She is still a friend to the cause, I feel sure. But I did not discuss this last affair with her at all."

"Ah! You don't mind me calling on her?"

"Not in the least. Under the circumstances, I feel glad you are going. You will come away, convinced of her innocence."

"I hope so. Did you, by any chance, mention anything of the plot to anybody else outside the circle?"

Alan shook his head.

"I don't think so."

"Any friends in London with whom you discussed Russian affairs?"

"No, save the Countess Brinski."

"The Countess Brinski exactly." Poletkevitch spoke with no particular emphasis. He was a shrewd man and of great experience. Besides, as we know, he was a relative of Countess Brinski. "Did you speak to her of politics?"

"Yes. You remember she gave me money for the cause."

"Of course. Did she know of the plot?"

"I don't think I told her of that," said Alan. "She knew there was something and that I was going to St Petersburg, but no more."

"No more." George Poletkevitch merely repeated the last two words as if he were considering certain matters that had nothing to do with the words he spoke. After a pause he said: "Anybody else?"

"No."

On again they walked without worrying for words. They had both thoughts to occupy them and Alan had even a desire to speak in Irene's defence. But George Poletkevitch was not an unjust man and Alan, having such confidence in Irene, felt that Poletkevitch's suspicions—if he had any—would be dissipated after an interview with her. But she was marrying Stephan Drumitz, who was—what?

That was an ugly reflection.

George Poletkevitch said he would call on Irene the following day, and when the big Russian got to his room he said to himself: "She knew there was something and that he was going to St Petersburg, but no more.—That, maybe, was enough!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"To a wise man the sound of a gnat sufficeth."
—*Turkish Proverb.*

IRENE was in the hurricane of packing. A letter from Stephan had recommended haste; he had been requested to take up his duties as governor at once, inasmuch as the province was reported to be "much disturbed" and required pacification. He had added significantly: "I think I shall find a way to make all quiet." Irene did not like the last phrase and she seemed to hesitate over her packing. It was as if she had not decided definitely to go to Russia at all. Yet she continued to make arrangements to leave London, and her attitude invariably returned to acquiescence. She bowed to fate. She, too, was ready to bear her burden decently.

When George Poletkevitch called, he was struck with the sad look that was now almost fixed on her. It is a grievous condition. She bore her burden, but it threatened to overcome her eventually. Almost at once this big, shrewd man came to the conclusion there was a secret sorrow eating at her heart. He felt sympathetically drawn towards her too, for she had not the bearing of a traitress.

"You are going to Russia, I hear," he said.

"Yes."

"To be married?"

"Y—yes."

"May I congratulate you?"

"Thank you."

She did not look comfortable and Poletkevitch, who had come to use his observation with keenness, wondered why.

"I hear your *fiancé* has been appointed Governor of Minsk."

"Yes."

Her monosyllable was not encouraging.

"I used to think at one time that you were a friend to our cause."

She did not meet his eye at first, and when she did, he was struck by the plaintive look she gave him.

"I think," she said, "I shall always be a friend to those who are oppressed."

"I am sure of it. I ought not to have suggested anything else. But your future husband—perhaps I have no right to mention it."

"The Governor of Minsk," she said, "need not necessarily be no friend to—the people."

"No—not necessarily."

And then neither spoke for a moment. These pauses were generally sandwiched in the speeches whenever George Poletkevitch was a party to a conversation.

"It is a hard battle that we fight in Russia," he said, "and we need all the friends we can get."

"I believe that."

"I should like to thank you for what you did—lately."

"I?"

"Yes."

She hesitated. At first she had not realised what he meant; now she did. Alan had told, and the fact that George Poletkevitch thanked her gave her a little pleasure.

"It was nothing," she said quietly. She would probably have made use of that expression had she sacrificed all she had for another.

"It was a great deal," he replied. "It betrayed a good heart. Unfortunately—" He shook his head. "I suppose you know the result?"

"Yes. I am sorry."

"We are all sorry. We should have won, without a blow, more than the outside world dreams of. By the bye, how did you come to learn of the plan?—You are now not connected with any organisation?"

"No."

"May I ask how you heard then?"

She hesitated—not thinking whether she should tell, but rather taking refuge in an absence of words till she found the right ones.

"I should like to know," he said.

"I should like you not to ask."

Her manner and look were frank: she did not speak as one who feared the truth might out, and her aspect impressed him.

"We are much disturbed," he said. "Our plot has failed. We do not like traitors and yet someone must have betrayed us."

Irene began to look more anxious now. Poletkevitch's manner was impressive, and Irene realised not only that she was hiding something, but also that her visitor might not be put off very easily.

"I don't think there has been a traitor," said Irene, "at least not a—" She stopped. She wished to hint that the person who had given the information had not done so maliciously; and she feared as she spoke that she might betray too much.

"Well?"

"I learnt my information by an accident—I can tell you no more. I don't think you need imagine you have a traitor in your committee or working with you. I—I—"

"Please tell me how you knew."

"I knew so little."

"That little—how did you know it?"

Irene felt run in a corner. She could always, if need be, turn her back to the wall and refuse to speak a word. But that was a desperate attitude. It magnified the hidden information out of all proportion. She wished to put off this man, to calm him, persuade him that he sought the little and the negligible, and send him away satisfied with an unanswered question. She did not understand George Poletkevitch.

"If I told you you would think nothing of it. It was by an accident I learned that—er—"

"Yes?"

"That Mr Leigh was suspected."

"Suspected of what?"

Irene shook her head. She began to feel that it would be much easier to tell all or nothing, than to answer questions and be on her guard all the time against the imprudent reply.

"I don't know," she said.

"You just knew he was suspected—by whom?—the Russian police?"

"Yes."

"Suspected of what?"

"I don't know. I don't even know now what the plot was. If it was one in which there was to be no bloodshed I am sorry it failed. I only found out—by an accident—that Mr Leigh was suspected."

George Poletkevitch nodded. Irene's face was a little flushed by the excitement, but there was no deception to be read there, and the man was not dissatisfied.

"And you warned him."

Irene did not speak. Alan's figure came before her with a bitter-sweet remembrance. At his name and the recollection of her last interview with him she was transported to the dulcamara land where tears have their gladness. The penetrating eyes of George Poletkevitch watched Irene's varying expressions with unwavering keenness. He became convinced of one matter.

Looking at Irene he nodded.

"You did bravely and you did well. Alan Leigh has been a good friend to the cause, and I should be sorry if those who fight for better days for Russia should turn their backs on him; but it may be rumoured that he did not want to succeed in this plot—that he was lukewarm and so — divulged it or part of it."

Irene was deeply interested now, and Poletkevitch saw at once he had struck a topic that could not leave her cold.

"Alan do that!" she said, and her eyes flashed. "He wouldn't. He couldn't."

Poletkevitch nodded.

"You say that. I say that. But the others—He failed. He was suspected. Nobody else was suspected. If he had acted discreetly the plot might have succeeded. They may suggest he boasted to an outsider of some deed he was going to do, and so gave an indication of what might happen."

Irene had lost her colour again. Paleness had returned to her cheeks, for charges against Alan's ability and honour could not leave her unmoved.

"He never boasted," she said. "If they blame him they will do very wrong." She looked almost frightened.

"I feel that," said George Poletkevitch, "and I should like to save him."

"Save him?" The expression was rough.

"Yes. The others may have lost confidence in him

and they may—" The word was very cleverly emphasised. "One never knows."

Irene recalled a paper—"The End of a Traitor." She stood up with fear in her eyes and she looked at Poletkevitch pleadingly.

"I know they will do him wrong if they mistrust him," she said. "You would not blame him if he said he was working for the cause to somebody he had a right to think was a friend."

"To somebody he had a right to think was a friend." Poletkevitch repeated the phrase as if it gave him a key. "We do talk to our friends of course; but who gave the information to the enemy?" He turned to her suddenly and spoke quickly: "How did you find out he was suspected? That is what we want to know."

Irene looked out of the window and spoke almost dreamily.

"He didn't tell me anything. He spoke to no enemy about the plot—at least he did not think—they were not friends."

George Poletkevitch did not speak. He was conning in his mind what Irene said and what it suggested. "He did not think they were not friends." Who was it?

Poletkevitch said—

"Well, I am sorry you will not enlighten me—in Alan's interest. I will not press you further. May I wish you a pleasant journey back to Russia?"

"Thank you."

"Your *fiancé* and Mr Leigh have never met, have they?"

Irene seemed confused. Alan and Stephan!

"I think not," she said.

"By the bye, do you know the Countess Brinski?"

"Yes."

"She is staying at the Carlton, isn't she?"

"I believe so."

"She is a connection of mine, I want to see her. I suppose she has called on you."

"She—has called—yes."

When he had gone, Irene reacted the interview and tried to realise what it all meant. Mr Poletkevitch had come to find out how she had learnt that Alan had been in danger. Nobody knew the answer to that save herself. The countess might guess, but she was the only person who had an inkling of the situation.

They blamed Alan! The injustice of that struck Irene. They blamed Alan! It was suggested that he had foolishly told or weakly let it be known that he was engaged in a serious enterprise. And as Irene thought of that she began to realise that many might blame Alan with some show of reason. He certainly had told, but Irene knew he had told in no boasting mood: he had not wanted the plot to fail. His companions might not believe that. Their view might not be lenient. Suppose they held Alan careless, not fit to be trusted, one to be ignored, perhaps despised?

Irene, with her knowledge on the one hand and her affection on the other, was pressed grievously. If Mr Poletkevitch knew the whole truth, he would not blame Alan, but for him to know all was impossible. The half was misleading. He might learn that Alan had spoken: suppose it was called boasting? Perhaps if that were found out the revolutionaries might not trust him again. Perhaps it would be to Alan's advantage—to his security from danger. This view was one that made Irene wonder with some anxiety. Alan might be saved from risk. But only because he was not trusted. That was too horrible a stigma.

Irene sighed. Worries had been her portion for some time now, and they were certainly leaving their mark on her. But she could not leave anything out of her reckoning that touched Alan's welfare. That he was held to be untrustworthy was an aspersion Irene was very desirous of removing if possible. Besides, the ways of some of the revolutionaries with those they suspected of treachery was drastic and relentless.

Alan suspected! She had been moved when that idea stirred her to go to St Petersburg. She was almost as much moved now. Being what she was she needs must think of something to do to save Alan. What would Mr Poletkevitch do? For a moment she thought in the void, and then her feelings were gripped and her emotion was taut again. He talked of calling on Countess Brinski. What would he learn? Irene felt again the necessity for action, for

one thing, at least, seemed imperative: the countess must be warned and put on her guard.

Irene could not wait. Even as she put on her hat she had a fear lest Poletkevitch had preceded her to the Carlton, and got from the countess details that did not redound to Alan's credit.

She went in the "tube" to Piccadilly Circus and then took a cab, fearful all the time lest she should be too late, and rejoicing that, on the eve of her departure, she had been able to do Alan a good turn.

She was not altogether happy, for the countess had alluded to Alan in terms that admitted of but one interpretation—she hoped to marry him. Whenever Irene thought of this she strove to put the idea away from her, and occupy her mind with other matters. It was not always an easy thing to do. Her emotions sometimes got the better of her, and flung her reasonable dictation overboard. She suffered for the liberty. But it was very difficult for her in moments like the present to fight these taunting images. The Countess Brinski and Alan married! The bare thought of that was hard. Resignation came at the end of the mental struggle, and Irene felt content to wait for the end with the patience she could command.

But why had the countess spoken to Stephan? Irene knew too much there to blame overmuch. Perhaps she gave Stephan credit for too much guile, and the countess credit for too little. At any rate she was willing to assume the man guiltier than

the woman, and that attitude is one well worthy of note; it stamped Irene's nobility of mind and the rare quality of her heart. Most women in similar circumstances would have blamed the woman.

The countess fortunately was in, and seemed surprised at the visit. There was a nervousness about her attitude that did not altogether escape Irene, and the look in her eyes was of the woman who fears. Conscience has few severer scourges than to make us dread news.

"I am glad I have found you in," said Irene.

The countess seemed more comfortable as Irene spoke, for the tone and manner were reassuring. She had still, however, her searching look — the look that must scan what is beyond. A distressing attitude.

"I am delighted to see you," she said.

There was a pause for a tiny lapse of time. Irene was finding the introduction to her story; the countess was seeking the motive and forgetting speech. The pause brought them both to their bearings.

"I have had a visitor," began Irene, "and that is why I have given you one. Mr Poletkevitch called on me."

"Mr Poletkevitch?"

The countess shook her head, and seemed to be thinking of all the people that Mr Poletkevitch might be.

"Yes," said Irene.

"I don't know him."

"Yet he said he was a relative of yours."

"I don't know him," repeated the countess. "Did his visit to you concern me?"

"Yes—at least, I think it might. He is a member of the Revolutionary Committee, and a friend of—Mr Leigh's."

The countess did not speak. She was trying not to lose the inflection of a note. Her whole being seemed intent on gathering all there was to be got from this interview. Her attitude certainly suggested an outlook ravenous and desperate.

"Mr Poletkevitch says that Alan is blamed for the failure of the last plot."

"Why? Alan did all he could."

"Yes. But they suggest he may have acted very foolishly by telling of the plot beforehand."

"Yes?"

"Mr Poletkevitch came to me to ask how I knew that Alan was suspected."

"Did you tell?"

"No."

The countess had asked the question with some anxiety and seemed relieved at the answer. She seemed from that moment to take courage.

"I don't know myself how you knew that," she said, smiling, and with a tinge of defiance in her attitude.

Irene seemed to take no notice of the remark.

"I thought," she said, "since Mr Poletkevitch suggested he would call on you, that you might as well know what his object might be."

"So sweet of you," said the countess, with a much relieved attitude. She was almost her natural self, smiling with ease, acting with conviction—a well-bred woman of to-day.

Irene felt the hollowness of the last remark and wondered for a moment if the countess could be trusted to see no wrong was done to Alan.

"If it is known," she said, "that Alan told—"

"Who is likely to tell?" asked the countess.

"If Mr Poletkevitch had come on you unawares, I was afraid that perhaps he might—"

The countess laughed—not a healthy or a hearty laugh, not even a frank titter of a laugh. It was something hollow and unreal. It suggested mirth at a funeral, joy over loss.

"He will get nothing from me that will prejudice Alan, at any rate," said the countess. "But I am most grateful for the warning. Mr Poletkevitch—a relation too? I can't think who he can be. Is he trying to make it his business in life to find out if Alan betrayed the plot? Rubbish, isn't it? I knew nothing of the whole plot myself, and if Alan didn't tell *me*— I expect this Mr Poletkevitch feels savage that the thing miscarried and wants to put the blame on Alan. So sweet of you to come, dear."

Irene rose. She had given her warning. Before she went she thought fit to make all clear.

"It is possible that if the revolutionaries knew that Alan had mentioned anything about the plot they might do some harm to him."

"They shall learn nothing from me," said the

countess, with the air of one confident and at ease. "When do you go?"

"To-morrow night."

"I hope you will have a pleasant journey, and I wish you every happiness. It was really very sweet of you to take the trouble to come."

CHAPTER XIX

"Resolutions are easier to make than to keep."

WHEN Irene had gone and the countess was alone she dropped her light and confident air as she might have loosed a domino. The need for acting had gone. The woman looked very serious. "Wanted me to grovel, I suppose," was her thought. "Expected me to play the wrong-doer and miserable sinner and ask how I was to act."

It was plain the Countess Brinski did not understand Irene and was another type of woman. But she quite realised that Mr Poletkevitch's inquiry would result in nothing to her advantage; her endeavour must be to see it should cause her no discomfort. What had set him on the track? The fact that Irene had warned Alan showed that she at least knew that he was suspected. How did *she* know?

The countess, sitting alone in her room thinking of impending events and a delicate interview, was suddenly moved by a puissant idea. That was clear from her attitude. She sat still for a moment and betrayed a certain obliquity of intention by the suspicion in her attitude. She looked at the door and seemed satisfied with her idea.

"I shall be ready for Mr Poletkevitch," she murmured.

She looked at herself in the mirror and at her costume. It was a graceful affair of pale blue with lace attractions, and she felt the impression it made was good. Then she wavered and rang for her maid. The result was that she changed into something in pale grey and felt satisfied on that score. It was not garish nor loud; it was attractive without being obtrusive, artistic without effort. It bespoke sobriety with taste, delight without fanfaronade.

Then she waited and reviewed the situation. Mr Poletkevitch was trying to find out how the news of the plot had leaked out. Was it really due to that rogue Stephan Drumitz? The countess shook her head. "What a monster! And going to marry Irene too! He was a fearsome creature. But would this Mr Poletkevitch know that? Not likely. Why had he been to Irene? The countess shrugged her shoulders and then suggested as an answer: "Trying Alan's friends."

She took up a book as she waited and paid no attention to the fact that she held it upside down. She was still anxiously preparing herself. She repeated: Irene had warned Alan and that showed *she* knew he was suspected. How did she know? The countess felt quite ready for the interview.

George Poletkevitch duly arrived. He was of the shabby order that visits the Carlton. The gorgeous porter looked at him curiously and wondered. Experience teaches. The head waiter as the Russian

passed thought nothing of him. He reduced men to the common denominator of tips. After all, we have all our own standard and so maintain variety.

George Poletkevitch was over six feet in height, and had a splendid pair of shoulders. He did not make the most of his height for he stooped and his clothes hung loosely. He was a man to exasperate a tailor. But then Poletkevitch thought of so many other things besides clothes.

He was shown into the countess's room, and she stared at him almost crudely. "Mr Poletkevitch"—this big man with the big hazel eyes, the big shoulders, the beard, the nose inclined to be squat and the fine complexion.

"George Paulovitch," she said, holding out her hand and smiling with ease and relief as she recognised her relative.

He took the hand and bent over it with a fine courtesy, as though he might have trod the corridors of courts in his youth.

"Marie Petrovna."

"Mr Poletkevitch?" she said. "Why this?"

He looked at her searchingly: he took notice of very small, almost insignificant things.

"A name—what is it?" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

She invited him to sit and he noticed the picturesqueness of the Louis XVI. furniture, and they talked of friends in Russia and of small affairs, for she believed in talking.

"How long have you been in London?" she asked

at length, trying to keep up a careless attitude and betraying the effort to this sharp-eyed man.

"Some time."

"How did you discover I was here?"

He paused and the countess did not like his slow methods: they suggested far too much thought.

"I am a friend of Alan Leigh," he said.

"Really. He told you I was here?"

"Yes. He also told me you were a revolutionary at last."

"Indeed." She felt the need for wariness: but she was too obviously wary.

"Have you become lukewarm again?"

"Not at all."

She wished he would come at once to the question of the plot instead of beating about the bush as she imagined he was doing.

He nodded his head.

"We have need of all our friends," he said.

"I expect so."

It was positively ridiculous, she thought, to continue going on like this.

"Your money was very welcome," he said.

"I was very pleased to give it."

"I hope you will not stop giving."

"No. I will give you some now if you want it."

She would have willingly given him a substantial cheque if only he would bluntly have talked of the plot and received her lucid explanation, or taken up his hat and gone away. He followed neither of these courses.

"We are always glad to get money," he said. "We can always find a good use for it and are rarely without the need of it."

She smiled sweetly.

"How much?"

"As much as you can."

"You shall have a cheque."

She took out her cheque-book and wrote, while he watched and considered. When she handed him the cheque she imagined she had given him a signal in one direction, and claimed his friendship in case of need.

George Poletkevitch, in furthering the cause he held dear was a respecter of Molière's motto: *Je prends mon bien ou je le trouve.* "Thank you," he said. "This is one of the most practical ways of helping us."

Was he waiting for her to strike out a line, she wondered. She began to think she ought to show a more fervent zeal for Russian freedom than the mere writing of a cheque denoted. What does he mean by prowling round a subject like this, she commented to herself.

"What are you doing? Are you plotting anything?" she asked.

He made one of his awkward pauses, probably thinking of the flatness of her enthusiasm for the cause as evidenced by what she said and left unsaid.

"You know Madame Drumitz?" he said.

"Yes."

He stopped again and she felt very impatient. To

a gossipy lady of society, who thinks words the essential of human conversation, this slow-speaking man was a trial.

"Did you ever meet her husband?"

"Step—er—her late husband?"

She called herself a fool for nearly mentioning the word Stephan; not because she considered that mattered, but because she felt she ought not to splutter forth things without thought. George Poletkevitch probably knew very well what he was doing when he played on this woman's patience.

"Yes," he said in answer to the countess's last question.

"I met him in St Petersburg, I think."

Poletkevitch nodded.

"Sad end."

"Very. He was murdered, wasn't he?"

"Murdered?" He looked at her keenly.

"I remember. Well—of course I know. I expect Irene—his widow—has felt it very much. She always appears to me like a woman with something on her mind."

"Um. Perhaps when she is married again—you know she is going to be married again?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a man is her *fiancé?*"

She hesitated. Perhaps Irene had mentioned that Stephan and she—the countess—had met. She saw her companion's eyes fixed on her and said to herself she was a match for him. She felt brave somehow. Perhaps it was the fact that she was at closer quarters

with the thing she feared that gave her greater courage.

"Odd-looking man," she said defiantly.

He nodded, and there was more in his nod this time than she observed.

"Friend to the cause?"

"I—I couldn't say."

"She is—eh?"

"Really!"

She imagined she had made the retort necessary.

"You don't seem to think so?" he said.

"How should I know?" Her gesture was one of indifference. "Her first husband doesn't seem to have been very friendly to you?"

"No. He—paid for his unfriendliness."

She shuddered.

"And yet I fancy he was as good a friend as this second husband."

She did not say anything now. It was risky. This Stephan Drumitz was an unreliable man.

"Are you surprised?" he said.

"If her first husband was a—what shall I say?"

"Spy!"

She was actually shocked at the word. It came out with loathing and without hesitation.

"Spy," she repeated in a minor key. "Well, if her first was one, why should she not choose a second if she wants?"

"Yes," he said, putting his hand through his beard, "that is a point of view. Do you trust her?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"You," he said, speaking in his slow, deliberate fashion, "are a friend to the cause and a woman is proverbially quick to observe."

"I—it is difficult to answer."

"Yes. Perhaps it is. She has, I suppose you know, just behaved like a friend."

"Oh?" It was meant to denote a surprise and failed.

"But you know?"

She felt she was fencing well enough. Why did she make these blunders?

"Are you referring to the—journey to St Petersburg?"

"Yes."

"That of course was—friendly."

"Very friendly."

"I quite agree with you there."

She was clearly not at ease. Her speech was coloured strangely. She flung her words out as if she feared to keep them back too long, and there was a nervousness in her demeanour that did not impress George Poletkevitch favourably. This big man with the big piercing eyes was a man to make any guilty woman uncomfortable. His fencing, too, was of a kind that did not breed enough confidence or bred too much. The countess felt alternately brave and timorous, although her courageous moods were of short duration.

"Yes," he said slowly, looking at her keenly. "She showed herself friendly on that occasion, but one never knows. We have been spoiled again—as you know."

Why did he say "as you know?" It put her in a quandary. How could she deny?

"You mean the—er—plot?" she stammered.

"Yes. Betrayed again."

"But may not the police have discovered it? That's what I said to Alan. The police are very clever, you know that, and I wouldn't trust them." She spoke quickly and with warmth, as if she would press the idea upon her companion.

"No, I wouldn't trust them," he said curiously. "Do you know a man called Vipoff?"

"Vipoff?—No."

"Would you trust Stephan Drumitz?"

She hesitated, and hesitated in the wrong way. She did not look as if she were wondering whether Mr Drumitz were to be trusted or not, but what she should say. George Poletkevitch's big hazel eyes were difficult to cheat. She felt she was hesitating too long and said hurriedly—

"I don't know."

"What do you think?"

"I—I didn't see much of him."

"But from the much you did see, what do you think?"

What a barbarous way this man had of conducting a conversation! The countess felt she would like to turn him out. He was most exasperating.

"Really I—well—candidly I don't know."

"Whether to trust him or not?"

"No."

"You have no idea whether he was a friend to the cause—or an enemy?"

She had to keep a great control over herself to cover her dislike of this conversation. She considered she was able to talk well enough—but those big, piercing eyes! Who could be comfortable with those searchlights flung on one's soul?

"If anything, I should think him a—friend."

"Why?"

Why? She would have liked to smother this man in a pit of whys, if such things could be. Why? Whatever makes men use this word so constantly? She threw her head up and gave a little laugh and then flung out the fold of her dress.

"Why?" she repeated. "*Toujours* why. Don't you know by this time that women don't have reasons? I think him a friend, *voilà tout!*"

"Why?"

She shook her head with a touch of weariness and shrugged her shoulders daintily.

"There is no 'why," George Paulovitch."

"Yes, there is. There always is. You can't think him a friend without a reason. Either he said or did something to give you your impression, and I want to know that something, because that is the reason I seek."

"I—I really can't remember. I only saw him once or twice."

"Quite enough. And this something—?"

She repressed her annoyance.

"He may have said he sympathised with the

revolutionary party." She spoke with a detached air.

"What I should expect him to say," Poletkevitch said slowly. "That is not a bad reason to give you your opinion, is it?"

She smiled.

"Why—every man says it."

"And every woman laughs at it."

She wondered whether she could switch him on to another topic, but considered the experiment dangerous: it suggested fear.

"I wonder if you know why I ask you all this, Marie Petrovna?"

She shook her head beautifully: she hadn't the least idea in the world. And yet he knew she lied, for she fenced too carefully and hid too much.

"Someone betrayed us: we want to find out who it was."

"But can I help you?"

"Perhaps. Madame Drumitz warned Alan Leigh that he was in danger. How did she know that?"

"Why not ask her?"

"She won't tell."

The countess looked more hopeful. Her nervousness left her. She felt in safer waters.

"Why?" she asked, with the smile of one who scores a point.

George Poletkevitch did not set much store on dialectical points, for he had more in him of the statesman than the politician.

"There is a suggestion that Alan—betrayed us."

"Alan!—He did nothing of the sort. He wouldn't do such a thing. How dare you hint at that? I think that is a scandalous accusation to make."

Poletkevitch nodded.

"He saved his skin and the plot failed," he said.

"It was not his fault: you know it was not. I am sure he did his best. I think it is abominable to suggest that Alan Leigh did anything that was not honourable." She was certainly roused now and felt more able to defend Alan because she saw herself left unaccused.

Poletkevitch seemed perfectly satisfied with the trend of the conversation.

"Suppose he told—say Irene Drumitz."

"Well?"

She seemed to welcome this suggestion with eagerness.

"And she told Stephan her cousin."

"Yes." How she was tantalised by his slow methods!

"And he saw that the plot failed."

She hardly knew what to say at first, but the idea was so like one she had harboured that she said after a pause, and as if speaking with diffidence—

"Well, as a matter of fact, that same idea had occurred to me."

He nodded. He was not given to saying "Really," and such expressions.

"Why?" he said instead.

They were in a serious mood and flippancy came only with an effort. She feared the false note in-

stinctively and meant now to go on with the accusation, so she did not wrestle with the torturing word this time.

"Because I don't trust—Irene Drumitz." After all, she was going away to Russia and nothing would come of this, so what did the accusation matter? And, after all, how did Irene know that Alan was in danger?

"Yet you trust Stephan Drumitz?" he said.

She looked surprised.

"I—I don't trust—did I say I trusted him?"

"You said you would regard him as a friend to the cause."

"That's not quite the same thing as trusting him."

"He is a friend whom you wouldn't trust?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't trust her?"

"No."

"Yet she went to St Petersburg to warn Alan."

The countess shrugged her shoulders as if to suggest that incident was of no account.

"Did she find out about the plot then?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"You knew about the plot, didn't you?"

"I?" She hesitated over that too much, for George Poletkevitch knew from Alan what she had been told.

"Yes."

"I didn't know anything about the plot."

"You knew that Alan was going to St Petersburg on illegal work." He spoke very decisively.

She hesitated, almost fearing.

"Perhaps I knew that, but no more."

"Exactly; did you tell her?"

She had a moment for consideration.

"I think I did," she said.

He paused, not in his observation, for that was almost ceaseless, but in speech. She felt he did not believe her.

"Maybe then she told Drumitz—eh?"

"It is possible, isn't it?"

"But he is a friend to us, isn't he?"

She was tired now and although she still thought she was a match for this man she hoped the interview would soon end.

"I don't know," she said a little irritably.

Again the pause.

"Then must we think that Alan told Irene Drumitz, and she told her *fiancé*, who told the authorities in St Petersburg that something was being concocted by the revolutionaries, and that Alan Leigh was to be one of the chief agents in the scheme?"

She felt she had been catechised enough and her patience was going.

"I don't think Alan told at all, so you needn't blame him. But as for the other two—well, I don't care what you think."

"Don't care?'

"No."

"But you are a revolutionary yourself, aren't you? And Alan Leigh is regarded with suspicion. He may be looked upon as a spy."

"Then I think it is contemptible. He is no spy. He ought to be above suspicion. If you would confine your attention to the Drumitz household, you might be more profitably employed." She spoke with heat and he noticed it. It is often then that the truth comes out. He spoke quicker than his wont.

"Woman or man?" he asked.

She paused a brief moment and then said—

"Woman."

He nodded and then surprised her, for he rose, his loose, big body towering near her.

"I don't suspect her," he said.

She looked at him with a wild impatience and turned away; but he caught her arm and held her. She looked at him with plain anger.

"Do you know why?" he asked.

There was no escaping the meaning of his look and she forgot her anger and her hurting arm; his eyes commanded her. She tried to give them look for look and failed utterly.

"Don't be a coward," he said. "It wasn't Irene Drumitz—it was you who told Stephan Drumitz," and the grip on her arm tightened and the look in his eyes was more brilliant still.

She turned to fight, simulating indignation; but the attempt was a failure. Her appearance invoked pity.

He let go her arm and looked at her and she turned to him pleadingly, her head bent. She had given in.

There was a long pause and neither of them seemed to stir.

"I meant nothing, George," she said at last in a broken voice. "Alan told me nothing of the plot—not a word. Stephan Drumitz said he wanted to help the cause."

He looked at her half-pityingly, half-contemptibly.

"Just as I thought," he said quietly.

"You won't tell Alan," she said, still gazing away from him. "Don't tell him. And don't let him be suspected. I meant no harm—you believe me?"

As he was silent she turned round and put her hands on his arm and then dared to look at him tearfully, hoping to gain by her physical attraction and pleading ways what he might have denied in reason. She was distinctly a woman of the world.

But he was not of her world. He drew back and to all her pleading he said—

"I will clear Alan." His gesture was short but very expressive.

He said no more and when he went she was filled with a horrible fear lest he told Alan.

No wonder she wept.

CHAPTER XX

"Postponements may be dangerous."

It was the temporary humiliation that made the Countess Brinski weep. Her repentance was called forth by the consequences of her action, not by detestation of the deed itself. She regretted because she suffered. As for the actual thing: "Passing on a bit of information—what was that?" In that way she treated the question. "Men make such a fuss of these small matters," she said to herself.

In affairs of honour the average woman lacks the public school training. The public schoolboy's decalogue might have been drawn up by Don Quixote; when he grows up he laughs at it, but many a man won't walk under a ladder because he heard, when he was a boy, it was unlucky to do so. Girls don't sufficiently understand the loyalty demanded by friendship, the contempt due to the sneak, or the niceties of a schoolboy honour. And habits stick.

The countess sat in her attractive grey costume conning over the plain facts of the situation. She was a woman of experience and had great faith in a woman's attractiveness for a man and in a gentleman's honour. She had got to the point when she was wondering whether George Poletkevitch would or

would not tell Alan that she had mentioned to someone whom she took to be a friend to the cause, that Alan was going to St Petersburg on illegal business. She knew her relative would not make use of those words, but the countess was in the habit of putting the best construction on her own doings even to herself. People who do that can never be properly trusted. Those who deceive themselves will always deceive others.

She felt sure Poletkevitch would not tell Alan, and even if he did, she imagined that her word would be preferred in that quarter. Persuading herself she had done nothing wrong—making a miscalculation respecting a man's views is not immoral, she argued—she was all the more inclined to the conviction that she could easily persuade Alan of her innocence and her trusting nature. Her story must persuade him. That appeals to a man. She was taken in by this Stephan Drumitz: she was more than sorry—would he ever forgive her? She would put her hands in his and look repentant—in pale blue.

George Poletkevitch might think he was very clever, but he was no match for a smart woman. These men! She almost laughed. Like many women who possess fair brains, she foolishly imagined the average man a little stupid. Many an intellectual woman hampers her judgment with a limited horizon and a magnified self. The Countess Brinski was of that order. She lacked breadth, and was too enamoured of the petty.

She determined to lose no opportunities, and made

it her business to find out what Alan knew. He called the next day, and she was delighted to notice that his manner was not colder, nor his conversation more restrained than usual. She was sure he had been told nothing, and wondered whether to silence all opposition by getting in first blow. But she funked. She did not wish to risk anything at this juncture. Were they engaged she would tell: she could trust him not to break off an engagement for that. She considered her own story always, not that told by George Poletkevitch. But the ground was too delicate at present. She strove to charm, and there was every indication that she made a good impression.

Alan had now given up all thoughts of Irene. He bore his disappointment with decency, and did not rail against the inevitable. He found it a little difficult to settle down to anything, and the companionship of Countess Brinski made life pleasanter.

With a deftness of which she was easily capable, she managed to induce him to suggest visits to exhibitions and suchlike excursions, which she enjoyed to the full and made the most use of.

She began to feel distinctly hopeful. Alan was more attentive; the suggestions for excursions now came from him without hint or prompting. Moreover, he showed keen appreciation of her by thinking of her when he was absent. She was much encouraged by that.

Alan was clearly falling under her influence. He was a man who liked women. They attracted him,

and their tenderness and sympathy made him feel he could do something for them. He was wondering whether he could console himself with the Countess Brinski as his wife.

Irene's image came always before him. He understood constancy, even if he felt it would not be his portion. But increased intercourse with the countess decreased the effect of the image. Irene was enthroned, and not to be cast down; but there seemed to be room for another idol. Alan was almost persuaded that his future was to be bound up with Countess Brinski.

George Poletkevitch had not told him of the countess's *rôle* in the drama of the plot, not deeming it essential. There seemed nothing to be gained by such a course at the present time. The revolutionaries were quiescent for the moment, so the countess could learn no more, and the moment any plot demanded their co-operation, Poletkevitch imagined he could then warn Alan effectively. Clearly, if a marriage between Alan and the countess took place, Alan would have to cut himself off from all intercourse with the revolutionary party—that Poletkevitch had decided. But he would warn Alan and leave him his choice if he heard they were engaged, or there was a likelihood of that happening.

Perhaps it was a fear of this that made the countess uneasy whenever Poletkevitch's name was mentioned. She meant, if possible, to keep her engagement from George Poletkevitch: the news of the marriage would be enough for him.

Alan had taken the countess for a motor ride, and arranged to take her to dinner at Prince's, and then to the Palace Theatre. Her seductiveness had accomplished its end. Constant excursions with a pretty woman who dressed exquisitely and had most attractive ways were bound to produce an effect on Alan. He meant to propose.

She waited for him to call. She knew she was winning, and was ready at any moment for the proposal. She had no fears now on the subject of Stephan Drumitz or George Poletkevitch, for both seemed to have forgotten her. And somehow she had a presentiment that Alan would speak to-night. She was right.

Alan had made up his mind. Few get to the land of their dreams; some of the intermediate places are very fair.

He had dressed, and, with the excitement of the proximate crisis, dressed with plenty of time to spare. His man called a cab and told the driver to go to the Carlton, but Alan on the way told the cabby to call at a florist's in Regent Street.

Alan was not altogether calm when he arrived at the Carlton. He had had to fight a little battle with his heart, for it insisted in crucial moments on reminding him of Irene. He had to call his philosophy to the rescue, and he was content. He had got in the habit of thinking of the countess's many attractions, and felt she would make him a most acceptable wife.

She was dressed with her usual tact and taste, and Alan was most agreeably impressed. She was also

discerning, and the look of something-to-say on Alan's face, linked to the admiration and the flowers, told her that her hour had come.

She felt imparadised. She greeted him easily, but with warmth. Feeling sure of herself and her conquest, she was inclined to play with her hour—extend it, hold her crisis, as it were, so that it should not be over too quickly.

"Beautiful," she said, as he handed her the flowers.

"You are right," he said.

"What are they?" she asked.

"The attribute of a woman," he said.

She was equal to the mood, feeling very confident.

"Never heard of it," she said a little archly.

"Egoism is reprehensible."

"Is obscurity much better?"

"Decidedly, if the—woman be plain."

She laughed, feeling very comfortable. She was wondering whether she would like the proposal now, or after dinner in the box at the theatre. She was certainly very confident. But Alan was transparent. He was a man with a mission, and he was too honest for concealment.

She was perhaps a little too fond of toying with the delicious. After all, if ecstasy came often and stayed long, we should probably sigh for more dulness. Still, a pretty woman, who knows she is well-dressed, and that the man is bent on proposing (and the woman always knows when that mood is on

a man) may be excused for lengthening the scene, if her desires run in that direction.

She entertained for some minutes by telling him news of their common friends, rejoicing meanwhile that what she had so greatly wanted had come to pass at last.

"There is no hurry?" she said at length.

"No." His monosyllable was very significant and she felt her power.

"You haven't admired my dress," she said, "and it happens to be the first time of wearing."

"Yes, I have," he said. "I may not have said anything, but I have admired."

"That is no good for a woman, Alan. She likes to have pleasant things dinned into her ears."

He made up his mind: she noticed it and was content.

"There are some things," he said, "I could go on dinning into your ears."

She tried to look innocent of his intention.

"Oh! why not din then?" she said. He came closer to her and seemed about to take her hand when her maid came.

"Mr Poletkevitch."

The countess felt angry, but repressed her feelings admirably. She was trying to make up her mind what to do. Should she say "not at home" to Mr Poletkevitch or receive him? She wondered why he came—not to spoil her with Alan surely! She looked at Alan, who could not be annoyed with his friend, but felt the infelicity of the moment.

"Shall I see him?" she said to Alan.

"As you like."

"I wonder what he wants," she murmured, as she wondered whether he came as friend or foe.

"See him," said Alan.

"Don't let him spoil our evening," she said.

Alan shook his head confidently.

"He won't do that."

So George Poletkevitch came in.

The countess received him with a charming cordiality, and one might have gathered from her greeting that the visitor was exceedingly welcome. Alan of course was pleased.

"I am glad to find you," said Poletkevitch, simply, when he shook hands with Alan.

"Really," said the countess. "Then you haven't come to see me?"

"Candidly, that was not my motive," said Poletkevitch.

She was relieved, and he noticed it.

"Am I the one you seek?" asked Alan.

"Yes."

The countess, worried by a conscience, wondered why he came, and tried to comfort herself by saying it had nothing to do with her.

For a moment there was a pause.

"Did you want to see Alan particularly?" the countess asked Poletkevitch.

"Yes."

Again she felt uneasy. Poletkevitch's arrival had been most inconveniently timed and she was afraid.

Her conscience pricked her. Her big relative was such a curious man too: he might have squeamish notions of honour, and at this moment it would not do to mention ugly-looking events to Alan. Besides there were so many ways of telling a story.

The countess looked before speaking. Like most women, she was sufficiently artistic in many of her dealings to conceal her art: and she dived into motives without hesitating on the brink. It was, of course, awkward for her that she came against a stolid, shrewd man of the type of George Poletkevitch, who was not easily turned by a pretty face, and rarely moved from a decision by appeals to his emotion. His desire to see Alan had to be complied with, that was clear; but the countess boggled.

"I will leave you," she said, still looking curiously at Poletkevitch, as if she would like to learn the object of his visit.

"Thank you," said the big man.

"Is it something serious?" asked Alan.

"Yes."

"Shall we go—?"

"No. Stay here," said the countess. "I will leave you."

Alan seemed inclined to protest, but Poletkevitch said nothing.

Being able to divine nothing, the countess felt very angry. But she was not without resource.

"Alan, would you mind getting my wrap from my maid? I will wait for you in the hall."

Alan went at once.

She turned to Poletkevitch.

"Why have you come, George Paulovitch?" she asked.

"Business."

"Illegal?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Tell me," she said, some emotion colouring her voice.

"I should not have come at all if I had found him at the Albany."

She looked more content.

"You won't tell?" she said.

He understood what she meant.

"Not without cause," he replied.

"Cause? What do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It was a mistake," she said, speaking quickly. "I had no idea. I'll give to the cause what you ask."

He showed very little emotion, and she gleaned little that was comforting from his expression.

"If you are thinking of marrying him he ought to know," he said.

"No, no; and there's plenty of time." They heard Alan coming back with the wrap. "Don't tell him now," she said. "Not now!"

It was really very difficult to hurry Mr Poletkevitch, and the countess had to change both her attitude and her expression the next moment, for Alan appeared. Hesitancy of speech can be most provoking. George

Poletkevitch had not had time to answer the Countess Brinski's appeal.

"Thank you," she said quite sweetly, as Alan put the wrap round her; but she was hiding her real feelings with a wrap deceptive. "You won't be long?"

"No," said Poletkevitch.

She hesitated a moment: whether to try and stay, or to pray or curse, it would be difficult to tell. Then she went out with the air of a woman at peace. She acted well.

Poletkevitch waited till she was out of earshot, and then he pulled out a letter.

"You might like to read that," he said, as he handed it to Alan.

Alan read it, and then looked at his friend with a wild astonishment in his face.

"If it is true!" he said.

"It would explain a deal," said Poletkevitch.

"I don't wonder. Now I understand." Alan was disturbed and his expressions were odd.

"The pogrom, too," said Poletkevitch.

"The villain!"

Poletkevitch nodded.

"We might talk it over with Krakoff, Kopenouski and Bloch to-night, say about twelve. Will you come?"

"Willingly."

"Where?"

"My rooms."

Poletkevitch nodded.

"I will tell the others." He turned to go. "I won't keep you," he said.

"We are going to Prince's and then to the Palace," said Alan; "but I'm afraid now I shall be thinking of —other things."

"You won't mind if I give you a word of advice?"

"Not at all."

"Don't ask the countess to marry you to-night?"

Alan looked surprised, and then blushed a little.

"Really, how odd! Why do you tell me that?"

"Promise."

Alan hesitated. Poletkevitch was too good a friend to give advice without consideration or adequate motive.

"I should like to know why you ask me to promise that?"

"A very good reason. I will tell it you some day —when you thank me."

"I promise," said Alan.

"*A bientôt*," said Poletkevitch.

"*A bientôt*."

As he went out the countess watched him with eager eyes, and then she looked as eagerly at Alan.

Something had happened to Alan. What was it? She tried to draw him out, and was bright and vivacious and merry. Alan almost forgot the letter he had read, the appointment he was to keep, and the promise he had made. Almost. . . . In the box at the Palace she leaned back and said—

"What was that you said you would like to go on dinning into my ears?"

He hesitated and remembered. He looked at her admiringly.

"You may not like to hear it."

"Try me."

He was tempted, but remembered the promise.

"If it is a good thing, it will keep," he said; "if it is bad, postpone it."

But she knew that in some affairs postponements are dangerous.

CHAPTER XXI

"The grave gave up its dead."

It is to be feared the Countess Brinski did not enjoy her reflections at the end of that evening so much as her anticipations at the beginning of it. That experience is common and teaches us wisdom. The countess felt no need of wisdom, but a great desire toward vindictiveness.

Why had not Alan proposed? The answer being too vague was annoying. She blamed George Poletkevitch. She trusted the big man somehow, but felt that he had done or said something—without betraying her—that had prevented Alan from proposing. As one might easily expect from a woman under similar circumstances, the countess was right.

She felt, however, there was still hope.

At about twelve o'clock there gathered in Alan's chambers in the Albany George Poletkevitch, Demetrius Krakoff, Mark Kopenouski, and Anton Bloch. They were not fashionable-looking men at all, and those who met them about the Albany wondered if they had locked all their valuables away or if the porter was alert. That is the worst view of clothes—to gain confidence or distrust from them. It is a superficial and showy age.

Alan was no ascetic, and he put cigars and wines

before his guests; but only he and Kopenouski smoked.

"I often had my suspicions," said Krakoff to Poletkevitch, who nodded acquiescence.

"He is a devil," said Kopenouski. It was clear they discussed a subject uppermost in all their minds.

"He will pay at last!" added Bloch.

Alan asked permission to read the letter again which Poletkevitch had showed him at the Carlton. As he read it Krakoff said to Poletkevitch—

"I shall go to Minsk; we will make sure."

"There is another way of making sure," said Poletkevitch.

"Well?"

"A visit to the cemetery."

Those who heard considered and nodded.

"Yes," said Krakoff. "It wouldn't be difficult?"

"No."

"With care," said Kopenouski; "we should not show ourselves; only we must choose a dark night."

"I want to go almost immediately to Russia," said Krakoff.

"Why not to-night?" said Bloch. "The night is dark, and two spades and a lantern—"

Alan, having finished the letter, handed it back to Krakoff.

"Your sister seems to be always in the thick of it," he said.

"Yes. What do you think of the news?"

"The first part is—" Alan shook his head. "It seems almost incomprehensible."

"My sister is not easily deceived," said Krakoff.

"I believe it," interjected Kopenouski. "It is just like him." He spoke in the elliptic fashion of one who knows his hearers understand.

"Like Drumitz?"

"Yes."

"It would explain a great deal," said Alan.

"Yes," said Poletkevitch. "It would explain almost everything."

They were all silent a moment.

"He will pay for it," said Bloch. "They always pay in the long run."

"Yes," said Krakoff, speaking deliberately and more to himself than to the others, "he will pay."

Poletkevitch looked at Alan.

"We are going to do something to solve the mystery," he said.

"Well?"

"We are going to Finchley cemetery—will you come?"

"That will certainly tell us something. Yes, I will come," said Alan. "When do you go?"

"To-night."

"I am ready," repeated Alan.

"But who knows where the grave is?" asked Kopenouski.

"I do," said Alan. "I went to the funeral."

In the grave in Finchley cemetery reposed a secret that would unlock many mysteries, and these men decided to bring that secret to the light.

It was now nearly half-past twelve, but they managed to secure two spades and a bull's-eye lantern. They hired a cab and Alan gave the driver a sovereign to drive them beyond Finchley cemetery to a cross-road. Here they got out and walked across some fields till they reached the wall of the cemetery farthest from the great North Road.

The night was dark, fortunately, and rain began to fall. The four men helped each other over the wall of the cemetery and then looked cautiously round. There seemed no living person besides themselves moving in that neighbourhood.

"Which direction?" asked Kopenouski in a whisper.

Alan was now not so confident of his memory. The cemetery had changed its appearance. New graves, new stones, had hidden the salient features of his visit, and he looked round strangely. Besides, it was dark, and they had entered from another way. These men, though, were patient. They had been engaged in work that demanded patience, and he who possesses that virtue holds a precious inheritance, provided it does not make him willing to suffer things that are unjust, for then it becomes cowardice.

"Hist!" said Krakoff, and they all kept still.

There was no one. The outstretched arm of a stone cross pointed ominously in the darkness, and imagination did the rest.

"We turned to the left after we left the path," said Alan, flinging back his memory to the day of the funeral.

"Let us find the path."

"I will go forward," said Alan, "you stay here." So Alan crept forward, hiding behind the ample cover till he reached the path. Then he looked round for anything that should remind him of his last visit. He was disappointed. The task was more difficult than he had thought. He began to feel the awkwardness of the position.

Krakoff came to him.

"Have you found it?"

"No."

"Have you no idea where it is?"

"I can see nothing to remind me."

They looked round, wondering in which direction they should go.

The others joined them.

"Lost your bearings?" asked Poletkevitch of Alan.

"I can't recall any of these tombstones."

"Is it about here?"

"Yes."

"Let us each take a line carefully, and feel the name on the stone."

So they separated. They took each a line of tombstones and worked down. They had to be careful to make as little noise as possible, and give no sign of their presence. Their fingers went out to the stones and they were occasionally baffled with one that had not had the names cut out.

It was Alan who found what they sought. In passing, he saw a small monument which he had previously noticed, and knew then he was on the right track. In less than five minutes he had found the grave. He stood near it and, crouching down, gave a little whistle. Bloch, who was next him, came.

"I've got it," said Alan. "Can you fetch the others?"

In a short time the four men were round the grave that held the secret. They listened intently. There seemed to be no one near. Poletkevitch turned the bull's-eye on the inscription and read—

"SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
PAUL ALEXANDER DRUMITZ."

"That will do," he said.

"That will do," echoed Krakoff, grimly, and he quietly turned up the bottoms of his trousers and took hold of a spade. Alan stood apart, wondering. He was struck too fiercely by the possibilities of the promised disclosure. This had been put up by Irene; she had stood here—not wept: he remembered that now with a thrill.

"Two of us had better watch the path," said Poletkevitch.

"I will take the other spade," said Kopenouski, "and you can come in half an hour."

"A quarter," said Alan, and he and George Polet-

kevitch went near to the path and lay down to watch.

Kopenouski and Krakoff began to dig. They did not speak a word, and as the spade cut into the ground they gave an instinctive look round, and then continued their digging without fear. They soon struck the clay and as the rain had ceased their work became harder. The clay stuck to the spade and they had to keep scraping it off with their feet.

Another inconvenience soon delayed them—only one could work at a time. Alan came now and took the spade and Kopenouski went to watch by the path while Krakoff stayed near Alan.

"He was a villain," whispered Krakoff.

"I begin to suspect it," said Alan.

"Suspect!" repeated Krakoff, with a sardonic laugh. "I know. But he will pay."

Alan went on digging.

"Suppose it is he," he said, as he scraped his spade on the grass near.

"I hope it is," said Krakoff, quietly, "but I don't expect that."

A few minutes later Alan came to something hard. Krakoff heard the noise.

"What's that?" he said.

Alan scraped with the spade and then felt with his hand.

"The coffin," he said.

"Good. Now for the story. Is that the head?" said Krakoff, eagerly, as he leaned over the grave.

"Hadn't you better fetch the others?"

Krakoff went without a word, too excited even for great caution.

"Come," he said. "He's at the coffin."

Alan had got out of the grave by the time the others were there.

"Have you looked?" asked Kopenouski.

"No. One of you can do that."

"I will," said Krakoff.

He went into the grave and Poletkevitch handed him a fret saw, a chisel and the lantern.

Nobody spoke now. From the mouth of the grave they watched their comrade saw the coffin-lid. The swish, swish came up with a regular beat till at length it ceased, and Krakoff used the chisel.

"Wait a moment," said Poletkevitch, and they all listened. "Go on," he said. "There is nobody about."

Krakoff cracked the lid of the coffin and then took the lantern. The three above peered in to catch a first glimpse of the face of the man who had been as they were.

Krakoff obscured the view of those above and his first ejaculation was—

"No—not he! Olga's right."

He then turned the lantern on the face of the corpse and let those above look.

"It's Mendel Reussner," said George Poletkevitch, very quietly and looking greatly surprised, almost as if he couldn't believe.

"Mendel Reussner," repeated Kopenouski and Alan.

The nature of the discovery, the tragedy of the tale, killed their speech for a moment. Then the mystery of it all attracted them.

"Mendel Alexandrovitch," said Poletkevitch, with feeling, for the dead man had been his friend.

They all looked down with a kindly sympathy. He had gone to his grave unknown, unlamented, and lain with a lie above him.

"My God!" ejaculated Kopenouski.

"Will that do?" asked Krakoff, who was most concerned with the living.

"Yes. Cover him up carefully," said Poletkevitch; and he turned to Alan and Kopenouski: "Mendel Reussner—what does it mean?"

Neither said anything. Alan took a spade and helped Krakoff to fill the grave again, while ever and again George Poletkevitch murmured: "Mendel Alexandrovitch."

When they were ready to return Poletkevitch gave a little ejaculation; just "Ah," and nodded his head. The others looked at him. "I think I understand," he said. "I understand." They waited. "Is this the way?" he whispered, and pointed towards the wall.

They went out without exchanging another word, leaving behind traces of their work on the clayey soil and wondering at the mystery they had dragged into the realm of knowledge.

They walked to the Great North Road and then

on to the Archway Tavern, where they found a tram ready to take them as far as King's Cross. They had abandoned the spades.

They walked in couples from King's Cross, Alan and Poletkevitch leading.

Krakoff seemed satisfied and was full of a wild excitement. His conversation was jerky and spasmodic, and he took no heed of what Kopenouski said. He was satisfied with the discovery and thought of the future.

George Poletkevitch and Alan walked on quietly, the big man thinking of the tragedy and of those concerned in it.

"Do you understand now?" he said to Alan.

"Not quite. It is too mystifying."

"You realise that Paul Drumitz is alive?"

"Yes—as Stephan."

"He never died. He was clever."

Alan was silent, thinking of Irene. He had sympathised with her as a widow and all the time she was a wife.

"You are thinking of her?" said Poletkevitch.

"Yes."

"A tragedy there," said Poletkevitch. "To save her husband's life she had to play the *rôle*. Do you understand her journey to St Petersburg now?"

Alan nodded. But he thought of other things. He had made love to her—the wife of another man. And he recalled that moment when she had let him kiss her and she seemed to halt between two opinions.

He realised her hesitation now. He had proposed that she should go away with him and live in any corner of the earth. She had wavered, but duty held her back.

What a life! Tied to Paul Drumitz—a spy. There was no disguising that now. His reward was the governorship of Minsk.

Yoked to a spy!

Her pallor, her sadness, her retirement were easily understood now. How she must suffer, despising the man!

Alan wondered if he could do anything, and saw the cruelty of bonds in certain cases and the futility of a satisfaction that ran contrary to duty. Irene would have stayed sentinel in Pompeii.

Alan acquiesced in George Poletkevitch's remark: "A tragedy there."

They walked the rest of the way to the Albany in silence. George Poletkevitch understood Alan, and Alan understood Irene.

In Alan's chambers Demetrius Krakoff was the most restless. The others were inclined to think over the unearthing of this secret, but Krakoff walked about the room and muttered—

"Drumitz—what a rogue! A spy! Wasn't Reussner one of us?" he asked Poletkevitch.

"Yes."

"Drumitz killed him, eh?"

"I expect so."

"Why?"

"Mendel would have killed him. Drumitz was a

traitor and that paper was meant for him. Poor Mendel must have bungled and Drumitz saw a way to throw us off the scent. Who was likely to know him in London? He goes away—anywhere; tells his wife what to say and do, and then comes back as Stephan Drumitz."

The whole tragedy was clear. Reussner had failed: Drumitz had triumphed.

Alan made tea in a samovar, and they kept to their Russian habit of putting lemon instead of milk in it.

"And now," said Krakoff, "this Drumitz will encourage, if not direct, a pogrom."

"What a pity Reussner failed!" said Kopenouski.

"Can't the pogrom be stopped?" asked Bloch. "Won't this new fact help our friends?"

"He won't like it to be known that he killed Mendel, Reussner," said Kopenouski.

"If we threatened him and told him what we knew perhaps he would stay these accursed murderers."

Krakoff shook his head.

"He is a double-dyed villain," he said.

"Couldn't your sister see him?" Alan suggested of Krakoff.

Krakoff shook his head and smiled sardonically. The others did not understand Krakoff.

"No," he said.

"It would, of course, be risky," said Alan.

Krakoff acquiesced with a smile.

"Very," he said. They did not know what Krakoff knew.

"It is awful to think of those poor people being butchered to make this traitor's glory," said Bloch.

"I am going to Minsk," said Krakoff, quietly.

The others looked at him.

"What to do?" asked Poletkevitch.

"To try and stop this pogrom or—avenge it."

CHAPTER XXII

Governor Drumitz in full force.

WHEN Alan was alone he began to reshape in order the startling events of the last few hours.

He had meant to ask the Countess Brinski to marry him. That idea now flitted with the inconsequence of a bird flying from a branch.

There was the letter from Olga Krakoff. He knew her, recalled her vivid personality and her earnestness. She had written to her brother telling him she was sure Stephan and Paul Drumitz were one. She had, as the reader may remember, good reason to know Paul Drumitz. She was now living near Minsk and had seen the new governor. Her observation was too keen to be deceived. She found an opportunity of hearing Drumitz speak, and noticed the peroxide hair and clean-shaven face closely. It was clearly Paul Drumitz doing his best with a disguise.

Olga Krakoff was greatly moved. She wrote to her brother at once and waited. She felt the trend of the drama.

But another matter troubled her. The late Governor of Minsk had been a man tolerant and liberal. He had stood for justice and an even hand, and was consequently in great disfavour with the

reactionaries. A refusal on his part to use the full powers of his office to extract a confession from a poor revolutionary whom the police had caught proved his undoing. Men of that tolerant stamp have little chance in the ranks of a government that puts down thinking by banishment. A few men and women more or less, a few tears, a few screams, a few graves —what are they against the comfort of the oligarchs who surround the Tsar? So the decent-minded governor was relieved of his post and another took his office. The new governor was Paul, otherwise Stephan Drumitz, who was now rewarded for his diligence as a spy.

It naturally followed that within the confines of the governorship of Minsk, those who took an advanced view of politics in Russia had taken heart. They had met together with some security: they had preached doctrines they believed were the rights of men. The reactionaries had longed to silence them, and with the advent of the new governor the horrible word "pogrom" was uttered. A Pogrom!

It was Olga who told the news to her brother, but many others had heard it. These things are heard by many outside Russia, but what can be done? Nothing can upset power but power.

Under the ægis of Stephan Drumitz there was hope in the breasts of many in Minsk that the pogrom being arranged would be carried out with excellent satisfaction. The "Union of the Russian People" had got the arrangements in hand.

The methods of the Union of the Russian People,

or the "Black Hundreds," as they are sometimes called, were well known to Alan. He was aware that the unscrupulous amongst the reactionaries organised the scum of the population, armed them and then deftly encouraged them to loot and to kill.

A pogrom was to take place under the governorship of Stephan Drumitz, which meant that when he was appealed to for protection by the citizens he would refuse to allow the soldiers to interfere with the Black Hundreds.

Alan was grievously moved. He never thought of these things without a wild emotion surging through him. He was one of those to whom an unjust thing is a call to arms. He was a crusader in a mercantile age. Happily he had not to earn money.

A pogrom!—He imagined it. The hooligans, the fear of those about to be pillaged, the silence—the uproar—the greater silence!

"Awful," he murmured to himself, and he seemed to look towards Russia, towards Minsk. Could nothing be done?

Irene would be in the midst of it! Alan was very tired now and his brain had lost its keenness. Irene would be in the midst of it. The idea would repeat itself and Alan felt as if there was something he ought to do. He was very tired, but the thought of Irene wakened him. The people would perhaps struggle with the Black Hundreds. Suppose some of them should want to retaliate on Drumitz and Irene should suffer!

Alan decided he, too, would go to Minsk.

When he woke in the morning he remembered his resolution, and went out immediately after breakfast to find Poletkevitch to tell him of his intention. Not everyone who says he will go to Minsk can get there. Passports are essential in Russia, and suspicion is a most disconcerting obstacle to progress in that country.

Poletkevitch took Alan to Krakoff to see what arrangements their comrade was making. They found him excellently prepared with a plan which had evidently been long ready: he was to go to Russia as the properly accredited representative of a firm of engineers. He was inclined to chuckle over the "engineering." Alan was persuaded to find some friend who would appoint him—or get someone else to do so—their representative in Russia. In case of suspicion the *bonâ fides* of the employing firm became of assistance. A man offering to pay his own expenses might confidently hope to be allowed to travel in Russia to sell other people's goods. Alan was quickly successful. He was introduced by a friend to a firm with a Russian connection, and the opportunity of advantage without risk was too good to be ignored. Alan became—on his passport—one of the civilising agents of the world—a commercial traveller.

Both he and Krakoff needed little time for packing. Much baggage was their discomfort. The art of travelling is, to a great extent, the ability to move

about with little luggage and to feel that nothing essential has been left behind. What luggage did these two travellers want? Precious little. They took enough in their minds.

Demetrius Krakoff was inclined to be silent, as though he hugged something he would not willingly share with another. At times, however, he would burst forth with heat and passion, and Alan understood the fiery nature of this enthusiastic plotter. At the name of Drumitz he became silent and his look was odd.

The journey was uneventful, and at the frontier the two men, who risked arrest, produced their passports and opened their luggage with the ease of generals.

Russia once more. The ikons and the candles, the tea, the double windows and double doors in the trains —so symbolic of a country of detention!

Minsk at last. They were both moved as they approached the end of their journey. Alan felt the presence of Irene; Krakoff was thinking of something desperate—of an account to settle with Drumitz.

The two men separated, Alan going to an hotel, Krakoff to stay with his sister, who was a schoolteacher.

Minsk is a town of about twenty thousand inhabitants, but it has none of the outward signs of prosperity that a town of its size would show in other western countries. The streets are dust in dry weather, and mud when it rains. There are a few fine buildings, but there are many wooden isbas. The officials in place have the usual air of the elect, but the

people now look apprehensive. Since the advent of the new governor a nervousness has taken hold of them. Rich and poor have furtive looks, and shopkeepers hesitate to take down their shutters, and are inclined to bolt their doors at the slightest noise of disturbance in the street. When the children go to school the mothers look after them anxiously with straining eyes, and feel joyful when they return home safely. There is a good deal of hiding of valuables, and people snatch at a kind of news with their hands on their hearts and a look of fear in their eyes.

The new governor is much discussed. Some say he is to be trusted, that he will see order preserved in Minsk, that he is kind-hearted and generous, and there is great relief at such news. Then there is another report: the governor has threatened to put down all political agitation with an iron hand. Those who keep clear of politics do not mind this much, but those who do are nervous. They know what the powers of a governor are, and they hope the report is not true. They sigh for the old governor, and hope most ardently that Governor Drumitz will do justly and love mercy.

In the meanwhile, the tension is felt. A sudden knock at the door makes the heart of a man or woman leap. A pistol shot is enough to cause doors to be bolted, shutters to be put up, and men and women to fear.

The citizens of Minsk do not like this position. They have even had a meeting and discussed what is best to be done. But they can scarcely decide. If the

new governor is not sympathetic, those who approach him may only make themselves conspicuous marks for his displeasure. If he is a just man and alive to the attributes of his office and the rights of the people, then their protest is a superfluity. They merely agree to be ready to defend themselves and to help each other.

But the news of the meeting reaches the ears of those who do not like political agitators. There are arrests. Men and women are taken from their homes, and there is heard that hateful word "Siberia."

No wonder there is a great tension in Minsk. Laughter seems to have gone or been subdued. Men look at their neighbours with suspicion. What does this atmosphere portend?

The preceding winter was severe, and many died of starvation. Seven months of a grim cold had found out the weak and the tender in a population that lives on the precipice of a bare existence. The peasants had sold their horses; the straw had been taken from the roofs of the isbas to feed the cattle. Even the poor mean dwellings had had to be destroyed for fuel, and four families crowded together in one isba. Black bread and raw salt cucumbers had been their food.

They had got hope again with the summer, but their memories were keen and their anticipations fearsome.

It was rumoured some of the most desperate had been encouraged with promises of good things to come. The store of Jacob Rosenthal had been pointed

out as one full of good things which would satisfy many needs, and be remarkably easy to obtain.

The rumour spread. Jacob Rosenthal became very uneasy. But other store-keepers, beginning to wonder why Jacob Rosenthal was signalled out, felt there was perhaps no very good reason why his store should be ransacked and theirs respected. Certainly, Jacob Rosenthal was a Jew, but a man who is tempted by loot is not to be turned by a Gentile.

Store-keepers became very anxious, and opened their shutters more carefully than before. They prayed to the Saints to protect them, and burned candles to the Virgin. They never passed an ikon without a prayer.

"Hospodi Promolui! — Hospodi Promolui!" — ("Lord, hear us! Lord, have mercy upon us!")

This was before a blow was struck. Many of them had had relatives in other towns where shops had been looted, and men, women and children killed, and nearly all had heard stories of the Black Hundreds.

The hooligans, having been well supplied with vodka and arms, got noisier and more outspoken. Their threats were frank. All Jews and intellectual people were enemies of Russia. "God preserve the Tsar!" they shouted. "Away with the Constitution!" And the people wondered if they could let the Tsar know of all this—he who was the shadow of God on earth, the *Zembla Bogh.*

The people who had arms looked them out. After all, it was better to defend one's self than to suffer unjustly. The leading citizens, now thoroughly

alarmed, held a meeting. They could suffer the tension no more. They decided to approach the governor and beg for protection.

They did approach as near to Governor Drumitz as they could get. He heard their opening sentences and heard no more. He cursed them for their impudence. He threatened them with fearful penalties for stirring up the people. He said if there was any disturbance it would be wholly due to their agitation and lies. They were enemies of their country. They were Jews and traitors, and they were taking advantage of the Tsar's magnificent kindness in granting reforms to stir up the people, and then pretend there were grievances to be redressed. But they had come to the wrong man. They had come to the wrong governor. He was not to be taken in by their canting ways. He knew agitators when he saw them. He was not to be deluded by those who traduced their fellow-citizens. They dared to suggest there was to be trouble in Minsk, did they? He would tell them this: there would very soon be order in Minsk. Yes, there would soon be order in Minsk—

And then he had them shown unceremoniously out of his presence.

Fear clung about the weakest now. They hid what they could, and then sought to hide themselves. The men looked at the women and their blood almost congealed. Hooligans, primed with vodka, do not behave with delicacy. Then the brave and desperate counselled courage, and armed themselves, sought

arms for others, and tried to look as though they feared nothing.

And they waited.

Alan in the hotel tried to get information from his landlord, but found it difficult. The man was of German stock and didn't meddle with politics, so he said. Alan asked what the new governor was like.

"Pale-looking man with red hair."

"Is he popular?'

"They are always that—and not."

"And his wife?" asked Alan. "Have you seen her?"

"No. Very retiring. Nobody sees her."

Alan had already met friends of the cause and was well informed of the trend of events. He too had armed himself; he began to fear there would be much bloodshed and possibly harm might come to Irene.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Arma Virumque cano."

THE policeman eyed the rabble with a lenient eye. In fact the look was more than lenient: it approached the envious. The people were armed with weapons and primed with vodka. They were shouting praises to the Tsar and curses to his opponents.

The fussy and vain *Ispravnik* attempted to direct the whirlwind and found the task too great. So he too watched it with an envious eye.

It was a motley and wild crowd. Nobody interfered with it. Its shouts and singing were heard with a tremulous anxiety. Fathers looked stern and apprehensive; mothers went pale and clutched their children. Plans that had been formulated for safety were carried out, provided something had not been forgotten.

Some of the daring men met together hurriedly.

"It's come," said one.

"They will pillage soon." The speech came in a fearsome whisper.

"And kill."

They were all very pale. Then spoke the voice of courage—

"We must defend ourselves."

"The governor must help us; he must order the soldiers to preserve order."

"The governor! He—"

The tone was contemptuous.

"Then we must defend ourselves."

It was the only course for men of spirit. The rabble was loosed, the dogs of riot were let slip.

The shouts approached the neighbourhood of Jacob Rosenthal's shop. Foot passengers had fled. It was not safe to meet this boisterous, yelling, drunken crowd. One poor man, laughed and jeered at, protested till he was savagely cut down. Then these hooligans, members of the "Union of Russian People" for the most part, felt they owed it to themselves to show they were not ashamed for having killed one man: they would repeat the business. They would do more. They would, in fact, do what they liked.

The shouts were redoubled, the curses multiplied exceedingly. Stones began to fly at windows and then a hardy man smashed the shutters of a shop. It was poor Jacob Rosenthal's. The bright pictures of what Jacob Rosenthal sold tempted the crowd to loot as they had before tempted them to buy.

First the shutters crashed with a sound that was a maddening encouragement to the crowd. It was an alluring sound, and there appears to be a destructive sense in all human beings, which is always magnified in a crowd. The joy of a crowd is to destroy. Alone man builds. That is probably why it is good for man both to be alone and to mix in the crowd, for there

is much good to be built up and much evil to be cast down.

Jacob Rosenthal wept when he heard first his door smashed and then his shutters and windows. He was hiding upstairs with many of his goods piled behind him when he heard the ruffians ransacking his shop and bespoiling him. They wasted and took. Their shouts did not affect him so much as the noise they made in destroying things of value. His wife and family were dumb with terror and only needed a little more terror to make them dangerously articulate.

"*Pashalst*"—("If you please").—One rogue was attempting humour with his plunder. His companions laughed and smashed.

Jacob Rosenthal forgot security and rushed from his hiding-place. He screamed and shouted and fought. The hooligans were astonished and Jacob's attack for a moment or two was unhindered. Then the numbers told. In all probability he felt no blow, for he was mad with rage and grief. When the ruffians had finished with him and put an end to all remonstrance on his part, they rushed upstairs to be met with a screaming woman and her children. They happened to be Jews.

"*Beda obna ne prichodit*"—("Misfortunes never come singly")—cried a man, with a hideous laugh, and he shot Jacob Rosenthal's wife dead.

So the work of the rabble went on. What happened to Jacob Rosenthal was not an isolated instance.

The police watched the looting; the soldiers kept out of the way.

In some houses the citizens fought. Young men as well as old were armed with rifles and revolvers and the crowd had no mind to be killed. But it is easy to fire through a window, to throw stones, even to burn things. The timid who cried for mercy generally cried in vain. There were things done which it is not well to write of.

Some of the daring ones made their way to the governor's house to beg for the interference of the soldiers in the name of humanity. But the governor swore at the messengers. What the citizens in Minsk were experiencing they had brought on themselves and richly deserved. They had asked for freedom for the people—this was how the people understood freedom.

The groans of fear were almost as heartrending as the cries of the wounded. Some wished they could have been killed outright.

"Death to the Jews. God bless the Tsar! We want no Constitution," shouted the rabble, as they continued their work.

The governor was told he was wanted. He swore.

"Who is it?"

"A soldier and a sister of mercy, Barin. They say they must see you at once."

"Soldier, ah! Show them in."

The soldier saluted, the sister bowed: her face was half-hidden by her hat and cloak.

"Well?" said Drumitz.

"I have something very urgent to tell you," began the soldier, and then he held a revolver towards the

governor, much to that gentleman's astonishment, and said, "Be quiet."

Paul Drumitz was nervous. Matters of this kind are apt to upset Russian governors who encourage massacres. And Drumitz felt himself an egregious fool for not having a guard inside the room. But a man disguised as a soldier!

"Don't move," said the man, and he held his revolver at such a distance that it would be difficult to miss Paul Drumitz if it went off. He nodded to the sister of mercy, who quickly went to the astonished and nervous governor and felt his pockets for arms.

"Keep looking this way, or I shoot you dead," said the man, and Paul Drumitz knew the value to be put on obedience in certain cases.

The sister of mercy, having relieved the governor of his revolver, put it on the table, and then, taking a cord from under her cloak, she proceeded to tie the apprehensive man to the chair on which he was sitting.

"If he moves, shout out," said the man to the sister of mercy ominously. But Paul Drumitz did not mean to move if it meant risking a bullet from that revolver.

"Hadn't I better leave his right arm free?" asked the woman.

"Yes—I had forgotten," said the man.

The binding having been satisfactorily accomplished, the pseudo soldier said to Drumitz—

"You will now do what I tell you without loss of time, or I shoot you without further warning. You

have got to pay for some of your crimes, Gospodin Paul Drumitz." Having said the word "Paul" with some emphasis, the man paused.

Drumitz, who was not without shifty abilities, at once said—

"Stephan, please, not Paul."

"I was in Finchley Cemetery, London, the other day. I helped to open a grave and I saw a coffin, that was supposed to contain Paul Drumitz, held a man called Mendel Reussner."

Drumitz was very pale now, and his eyes had a look of wild expectancy, as if he sought ravenously for hope. He looked mostly at the man, but occasionally at the woman. His aspect was so fearsome as to excite contempt; he seemed to have allowed his self-respect to abdicate. But there was a clutching something ready for the slightest advantage seen in his eyes. He tried to look astonished without guilt.

"Besides," said the man, "hair-dye and a razor won't do everything; they don't get rid of the scar on your right ear. That doesn't run in families. Turn round, Olga."

The sister of mercy lifted her curious hat and looked Paul Drumitz in the face.

"I am Demetrius Krakoff," said the man. "We have an account to settle with you."

Olga interrupted.

"Stop the pogrom," she said quietly.

"Yes." He turned to Drumitz: "Write at once and order the military to protect the citizens and stop this murder and looting."

Paul Drumitz looked as if he would like to refuse.

Olga pushed paper and pen before him.

"Cover him," said the man.

Olga held out a revolver menacingly; the man drew out a knife. Paul Drumitz had an abject look. He took up the pen with haste. He was so nervous that he wrote with great difficulty; but the other two prompted him, and what he did write was eminently satisfactory. Demetrius Krakoff was satisfied. Olga sighed with delight. It was worth living to have obtained that, and her clear face, with its wondrous black eyes and hair, was lit with a joyful radiancy.

"Will you take it?" he said.

"You," she replied. "You will go quicker, Demetrius."

"You don't mind staying here?"

"Not at all."

"Shoot at the slightest movement. Here—"

Demetrius Krakoff wrote: "Notice.—I am not to be disturbed on any pretext whatever." "Sign that," he said, pushing the paper to Drumitz, who did not hesitate, because he thought that Demetrius Krakoff would soon leave him.

Having pinned the paper outside the door, Krakoff said to his sister: "I shall not be long, and then we can finish. Don't be afraid to shoot." Then he rushed with a wild delight to let the commanding officer have the order from the governor.

The pogrom in Minsk was over. The appearance of the soldiers in the street mystified the rabble at

first, and then chastened them. They felt so elated they were inclined to object, but the whips of the Cossacks made them run like rats to the nearest hole. The most drunk could not run at all, and some of them were maimed. But the looting was stopped, and the frightened people came from their caves and attics, and wondered whether yet they were safe, or if this were only a ruse to drag them from their hiding-places. But one got clear news, then another.

"The governor orders it. He will have peace."

The governor's order had come too late for Jacob Rosenthal and those like him: they had found a peace which none could ever more disturb. So many things in this world come too late.

Paul Drumitz, hearing Krakoff go, wondered what he might and should do. He began to look furtively at Olga, who seemed immovable as marble. He really felt as if he could not speak. Yet there was that threat of her brother: "Then we can finish." Finish what? *Him*—Paul Drumitz! What a blood-thirsty creature! He looked like a man who could shoot anybody in cold blood.

Yet Drumitz feared the woman too. He feared both brother and sister, for he had done both of them injuries of an unforgettable kind. Still, there was the woman alone, and it was always easier to deal with a woman than a man.

"Then we can finish!"

The phrase stabbed him again. Just as he had reaped the fruit of all his toiling he was caught like

this. What a shame! What a fool he was not to have a guard! If he could only warn somebody. That notice! This Krakoff thought of everything. A woman— If he only had a revolver . . .

"Then we can finish."

He won't be very long away, and then he will come back to finish. Drumitz felt the need for doing something. After all, he thought he had one thing to congratulate himself about—he was left with the woman to guard him, and not the man.

Olga scarcely seemed to move. All was quiet in the house. Some strange hum from the wounded town came ever and anon, but it was vague and meaningless, and bore no message to the two who watched each other in that room.

The clock on the mantelshelf ticked away, and Drumitz, catching sight of it, was caught with a spasm of fear. Time was flying, flying, flying. Krakoff was getting nearer to his return.—"Then we can finish."

Drumitz's face was haggard and ugly. It was pale with colour in patches, like splashes of blood that had been badly washed off. He had a repulsive air—that of a man who is horribly afraid. He could wait and contain himself no longer.

"Er—" he began in a hollow voice. Then he stopped. Olga did not move. Her expression was one betraying little: it was as if she merely waited. Drumitz took courage.

"What are you going to do?" he said, speaking half-defiantly and half-diffidently.

Olga said nothing, and made no sign.

He was silent for a moment or two, and then he repeated—

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," said Olga, very quietly.

"What are you going to do?"

Tick—tick—tick—tick. The clock annoyed him now, particularly as Olga appeared to be in no hurry to answer his questions. He leaned forward.

"Olga!" he said.

She shivered. The reminiscence was ugly. She had been looking more at his arm than his face, but now she turned to look him in the face. He appeared humble. If he had not been so good an actor he had been less successful as a spy.

"Forgive me, Olga," he said. "You don't know what I have suffered."

She gave him one look of contempt, and resumed the watch on his right arm.

He tried to read her so that he might know which key he ought to strike. And as he looked the tick of the clock went on ominously and warningly.

"If you do anything to me," he said, "you will regret it."

She made no reply. A most annoying attitude.

"I am not thinking of myself," he said. "I am thinking of you and your brother and all—our friends."

She could not refrain from looking at him in amazement. He met her gaze fairly well.

"Friends," she just murmured.

"Yes," he repeated. "I have not had a sweet life, Olga. I have had to play many *rôles*; but I have in my heart always been true to—the cause."

She was prodigiously astonished.

"True to the cause—*you?*" she said, hiding none of her feelings.

"Yes. I have my own way, and in the end you will bless me."

She shook her head.

"The end isn't far off."

He looked at her almost cravenly. He was horribly afraid of death. The selfish and unfeeling cling desperately to life.

"You don't mean that," he said in almost a whispering tone.

She made no reply for a moment. Then, turning on him a look of contempt, she said—

"You a friend to the cause!"

He was of that type that believes if a person insists on his innocence with loudness other people will hesitate to call him guilty.

"Yes," he said. "Always. I have helped the cause in hundreds of ways. I have done more good to it, I feel sure, than you and your brother combined. I have worked behind the scenes and helped, I think I might say, a dozen politicals to escape. I am here, what I am, solely to help the cause."

"I don't believe you," she said simply.

"I can perhaps hardly expect you to do so," he replied, in a voice of very clever pathos.

"Considering that you betrayed my brother," she said.

"I?" His astonishment was excellent.

"Yes, you!"

"Well, of course, if you believe that I don't wonder

at your attitude. But it isn't true. *I* betray your brother! Never! Never in this world! I helped him to escape by throwing the police on the wrong scent. I have always had to mask my doings. I am, you must remember, trusted by the Government. I must keep that trust so that I can help—I was going to say my friends, but really they seem to doubt my friendship."

Olga said nothing, but she was impressed. She was so frankly honest herself that she did not readily suspect the liar.

"You can tell that to my brother when he returns," she said.

"To your brother?"

"Yes."

"But he perhaps thinks he has a—private grudge against me."

"Probably; but he would not kill you for anything done to himself."

"Then for what?"

She hesitated, and he guessed the reason.

"Do you mean he would—do things on your account?"

She did not answer. She herself had no desire to punish Drumitz with death for what he had done to her, but she regarded him now as a man who would send political workers to their death in Russia whenever he got the chance. He had betrayed enough in her opinion to justify her taking his life. Her brother took this view, and considered he would serve humanity by ridding the world of a scoundrel. But he was also moved by Drumitz's treatment of his

sister. That inflamed him. Olga knew this. For her sake Drumitz must die, and she believed the killing of him would be no unrighteous thing. But she was, at the same time, undesirous to make her own wrongs the front and head of Drumitz's offending.

He was quick to note her silence and the absence of accusation on her own account.

"If you only knew, Olga," he said, speaking in the tone of one who has been cruelly misunderstood.

"I think I do know," she said.

He shook his head.

"No, you can't. You perhaps never will. I did wrong, I know, and I have paid for it. But you know I loved you. I was married—but I will not mention that. I loved you. I would have done anything. Yes, I wronged you. I deserve to suffer for that, perhaps. Yet, if you knew all, you would probably forgive me. But a traitor to the cause—never! You believe me, Olga?"

His spying habits had given him a well-developed ability to notice other people's emotions, their feelings and intentions. He saw that Olga, in spite of her desire to remain impassive, was touched. Love wears well, is lenient and most forgiving.

"Olga!"

"Well?"

"You forgive me? I know I behaved badly to you —awfully! How I have rued it! Some of us marry too soon and—but—you forgive me?"

"I forgive you!" she said quietly. "I am not thinking of myself."

"Of what, then?"

"Of the cause."

"The cause! But I am of the cause."

"*You!*" Her scorn was marked. She still remembered many things, amongst them the face at the gate at Tsarskoe Selo. "Wait till my brother returns," she said curtly.

That, of course, was what he wished to avoid. He might persuade the woman but not the man. And he would not persuade the woman with the man by her side, for she would remember her brother's wrongs then with bitterness if mention should be made of them. With revolvers, too, and these revolutionaries were quick to shoot when they had made up their mind.

Tick—tick—tick. The clock rang out its warning in the silence. Drumitz was very anxious and feared he might not get clear in time.

The next moment he heard a noise of voices outside his door, and steps approached. He longed to cry out, and looked at Olga searchingly.

"Don't speak," she said. She, too, heard the steps.

There was a knock on the door.

"Tell them to go away," whispered Olga.

He hesitated. It was a chance. Would she fire? He felt it was not safe to try.

"Go away," he said in a very weak voice.

But the person, instead of going away, opened the door. Olga started and went nearer to Drumitz, who hardly knew what to do. He feared he might suffer, and yet there was a hope that whoever came was a friend.

Irene entered.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Hanging and wiving goes by Destiny."
—*Merchant of Venice.*

THEY were all surprised. Irene was moved greatly, for Alan, having been told of the governor's refusal to order the military to protect the citizens, had volunteered to do what he could to persuade him. He had managed to reach the governor's house in safety, and had asked to see Irene. To her he told the story of what was happening in the town, and begged her to plead with her husband in the name of humanity. He was now standing in the passage, having accompanied Irene to the door.

Drumitz's face was flushed with a rush of hope. The new-comer was not Krakoff, and with Irene there was a chance. It was awkward, of course, this meeting between the two women, still better that than the arrival of the determined Krakoff. But what had Irene come for? He was fast in the chair—tied like a prisoner. It was not a dignified position. but a man who risks life and deals in death can't afford to pay very much attention to dignity. His wife would help him—he knew that. He knew her tender heart and her weakness. What luck, after all!

His eyes began to tell his hopes.

Irene was, of course, astonished. Her husband, the

Governor of Minsk, bound! But she was accustomed to surprises, and the impending tragedy. She had known the real truth of the saying, "Nobody knows what a day may bring forth" by actual experience, and it was awful! She had come in eagerly, ready to brave displeasure and wrath, her heart filled with sympathy that Alan's recital had evoked. But she was dumb. To plead to a man bound is too incongruous a thing. She looked at her husband in amazement and then at Olga.

The two women recognised each other almost at the same moment.

"You!" said Irene, advancing.

"You!" said Olga, with infinite feeling and a wondrous sympathy.

Drumitz looked on in amazement, not daring to speak lest he should say the wrong word, use the wrong intonation.

The women shook hands, and Olga was the more disturbed, the more distressed of the two. Irene suddenly said—

"But excuse me a moment." She turned to her husband. "There is murder going on in the town: won't you stop it?"

"I have stopped it," he said.

"Stopped it!" Irene repeated the words as if she could scarcely believe them, and made a step towards the door.

"Yes," he said. "I have sent a message to tell the military to protect those who need protection, and see there is no disturbance."

"Thank God!" murmured Irene. And then she seemed as if in her joy she would go out, but the position of her husband was too odd to be ignored. She looked at him and then at Olga, clearly seeking information.

He was agitated, scarcely knowing what to do, but feeling the situation more favourable to himself.

Olga was unhappy. This was Paul Drumitz's wife. She had made that great journey to warn them.—No wonder she could not tell how she knew. And was her husband to be killed? It was horrible.

Drumitz keen to note the psychological, felt much more hopeful.

"My wife," he said almost timidly to Olga.

Olga scarcely moved. She was saying to herself all the time: "His wife—his wife—"

"There is something wrong," said Irene. "What is it?" She looked at them both. He looked at Olga. Irene followed the gaze.

"What is the matter?" she said, going to Olga.

"I wish you hadn't come," said Olga, speaking very quietly.

"What is wrong?"

He was watching with a superlative keenness.

Olga shook her head.

"Tell me," said Irene, pleadingly.

"His wife—his wife," Olga was saying to herself, and could say no more.

"I am to be shot," said Drumitz, bluntly.

Irene started: the shock was great. Olga was pained at the wife's agitation.

"It isn't true, is it?" said Irene, in a tremulous voice to Olga.

Olga drew herself up as if she would play her game in spite of all.

"He has been a traitor," she said.

Irene went deathly white. Her knowledge was great to give the man she called husband the benefit of a doubt. She could say nothing for a moment, and then, dropping on her knees, she said quietly—

"Forgive him—let him go."

Olga looked round—not at Drumitz—at anything and nothing. She was wondering what to do. A wave of perplexity had caught her. What should she do? If her brother returned he might shoot at once. And the man was *her* husband. Here was the wronged wife pleading for the rogue's life. Then there was the cause— Olga looked round in distress.

Drumitz was crouching forward with his head on one side, looking with a haggard face at Olga, and sending all the will of which he was capable into his wife's prayer.

Irene clutched Olga's cloak.

"Forgive him," she repeated in a whisper so low, and yet so full of meaning, that Olga almost wept over the sweet face upturned to her. It was as if the wife said: "I have forgiven him—won't you?"

Olga clenched her hands tightly.

"The cause!" she murmured, and he knew she wavered.

Irene was silent, but Drumitz spoke.

"I am with you," he said eagerly.

"How can I trust you?"

"I'll do anything you want."

"Swear before us both—but what is the good?" Olga had made up her mind and yet felt with a sound intuition that it was useless to trust to the word of this man. "I can't kill you," she said. "Your wife has saved you."

He would rather have had salvation in some other way, for he had wronged his wife too much to desire it at her hands. But better that way than not at all.

Irene rose, white and silent.

Olga went to her and kissed her.

"You can loose him," she said.

Irene went quietly and without haste to the chair and untied the rope.

Drumitz, free, wondered what he should do. He looked dangerously at Olga for a moment, but hesitated.

"Sign these two passports," said Olga, quietly, handing him the papers.

He hesitated a moment and then signed.

Irene stood apart, and Olga noticed that she did not meet the eye of her husband. He, of course, noticed her attitude and was angry in consequence.

He was still a little afraid of Olga's revolver and hoped she would go away quickly. But she went to Irene again, and he, judging it a favourable opportunity, slipped to the door and went out. Then he met Alan.

"You," he said, and swore and then recovered him-

self. "I've stopped the massacre," he added quickly. "I'm in a hurry—see you later." He had still a mortal fear of Olga's revolver and he almost ran out of the passage into the hall and out of the house. The door had just closed behind him when Demetrius Krakoff met him.

"Just in time," said Krakoff, and he drew his revolver.

Drumitz looked to right and left and beyond Krakoff. He felt it impossible to utter a word. His crimes were a heavy burden.

Krakoff shot and Paul Drumitz fell dead.

The guards had no difficulty in arresting the assassin, but Alan and Olga, helped by Irene, got away, the two passports signed by Drumitz being their salvation.

Krakoff might have escaped the death penalty had he chosen to plead a vengeance for his sister's sake. But he kept her name out of the business, and so it was reckoned a political crime pure and simple—so all the newspapers naturally said—and Krakoff died like a man, courageous and calm.

Olga went to Switzerland, but she is probably back in Russia by this time. She said she could not keep away.

It is rumoured that the Countess Brinski is engaged to be married to a Monsieur de Basseaux. After all, the second best is the lot of most.

Irene left Russia and came to England. The colour returned to her cheeks and Alan to her side.

He waited as long as he could, and then he came once more with an old question. This time there was no chain holding her and she walked into love's arms without fear and with great joy.

"At last," he said as he kissed her.

She smiled with radiancy for she held all her troubles compensated for in this glad moment.

When George Poletkevitch heard the news he called on Alan to congratulate him.

Alan took his friend by the hand and shook it warmly.

"All my thanks to you," he said. "I shall never forget you. You remember the hint at the Carlton?"

Poletkevitch nodded.

"If you hadn't made me promise," said Alan, and he shuddered. "There are not many, old friend, who can see in the future so well as you."

George Poletkevitch shook his head.

"The future!" he said, throwing out his hands with an expressive gesture. "Some of us have to be content with a few visions from the past."

THE END

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